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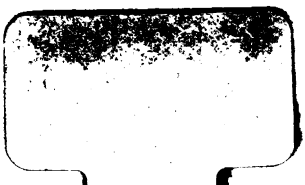
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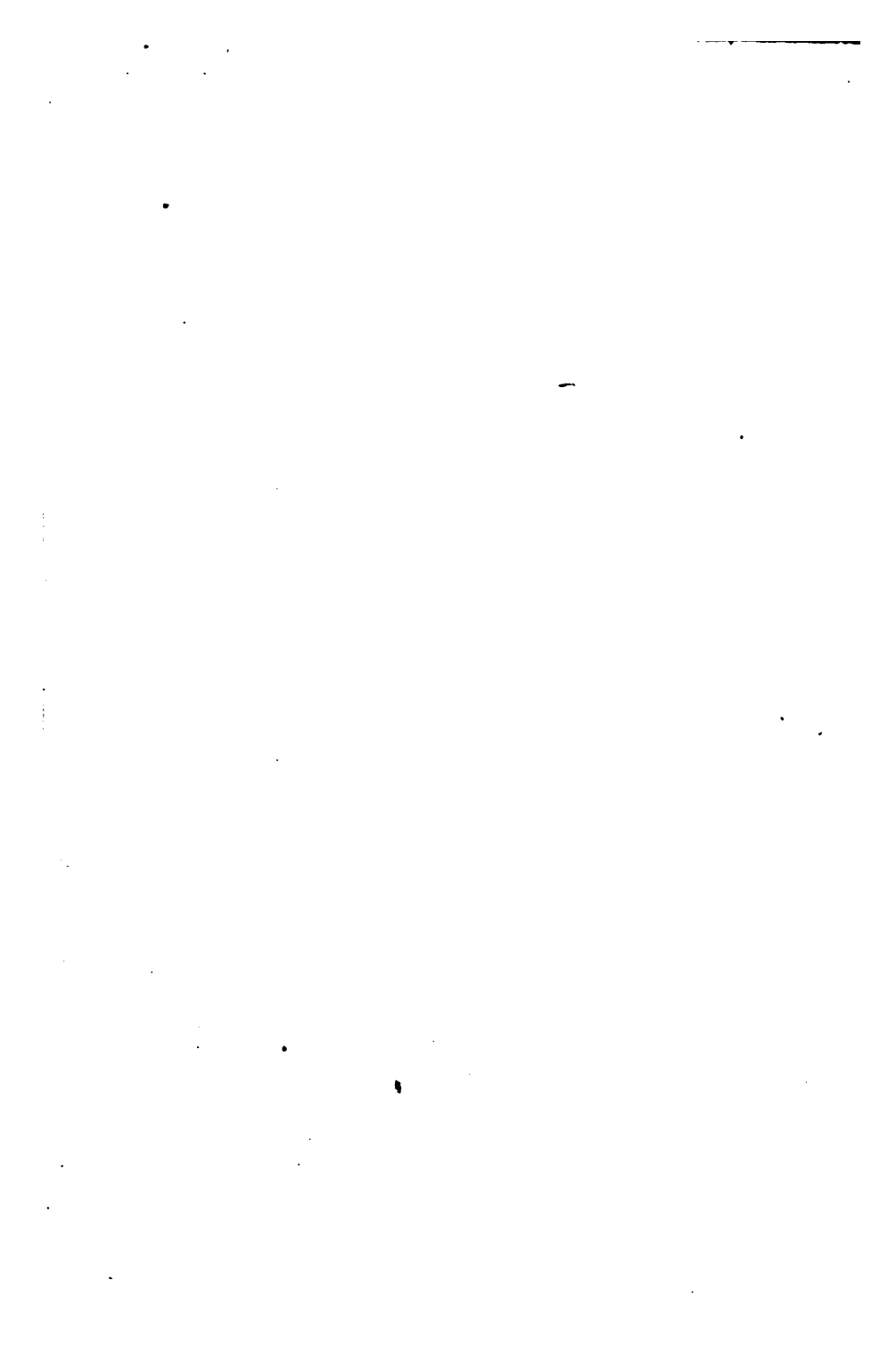
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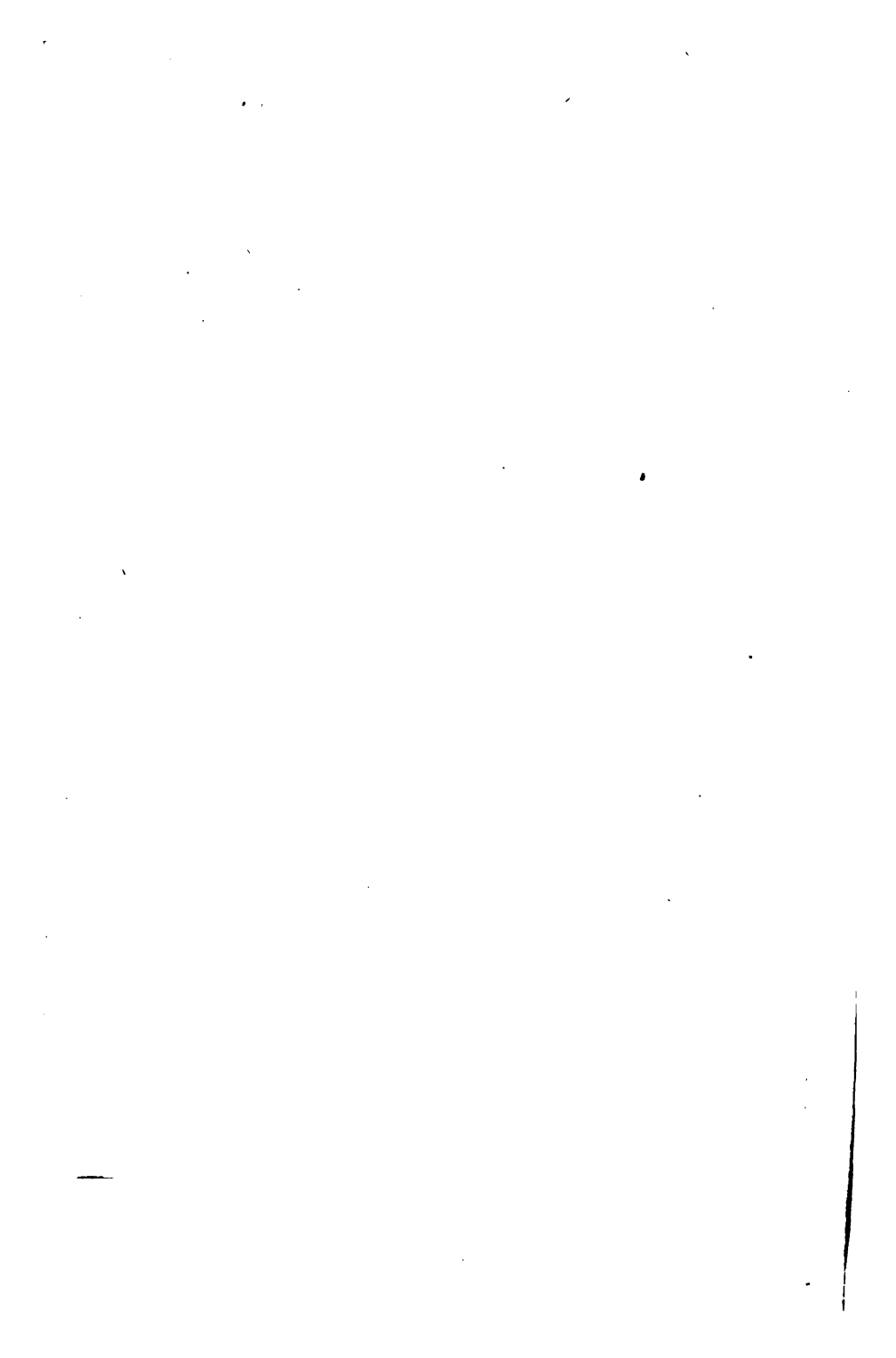
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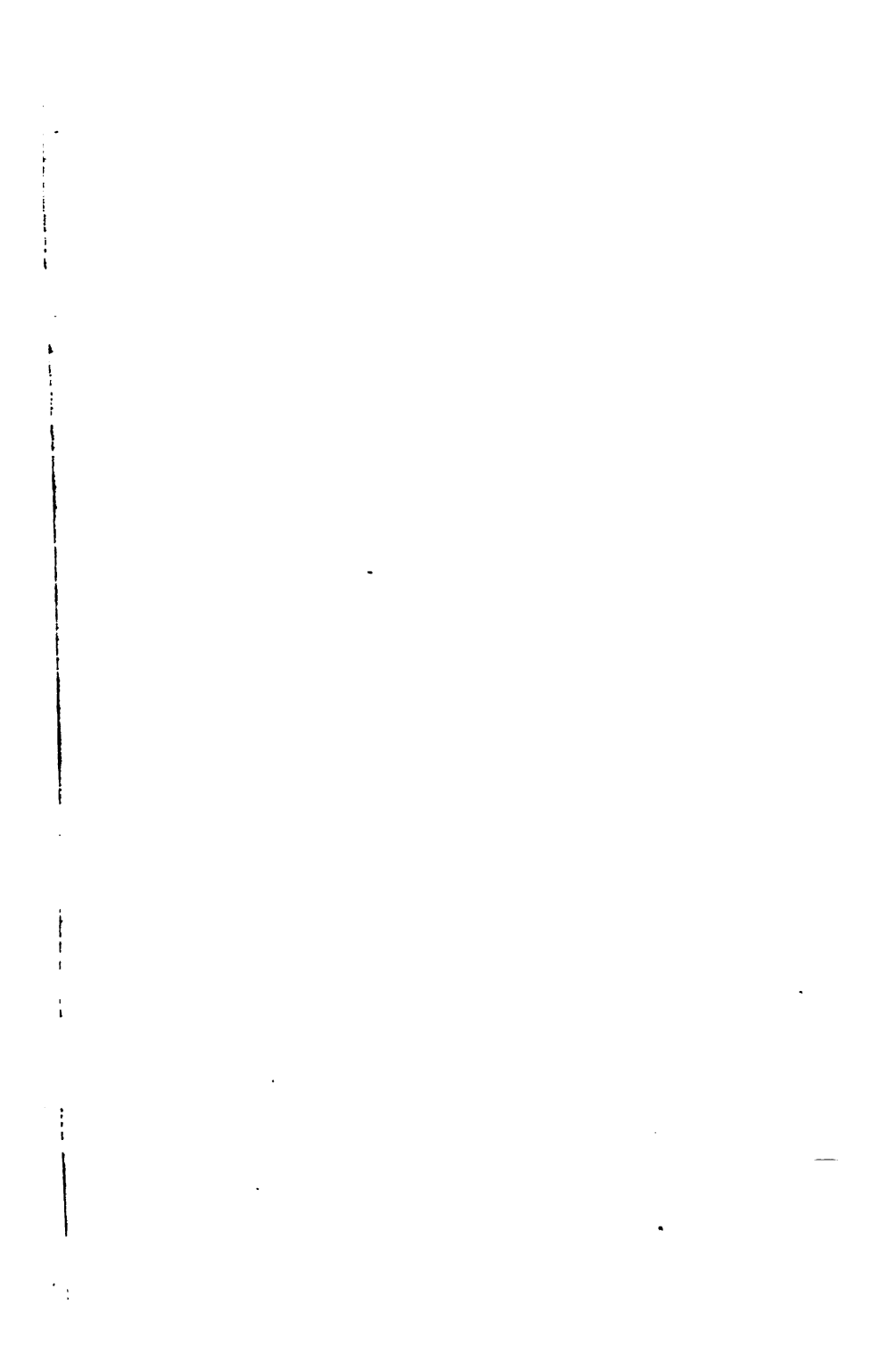


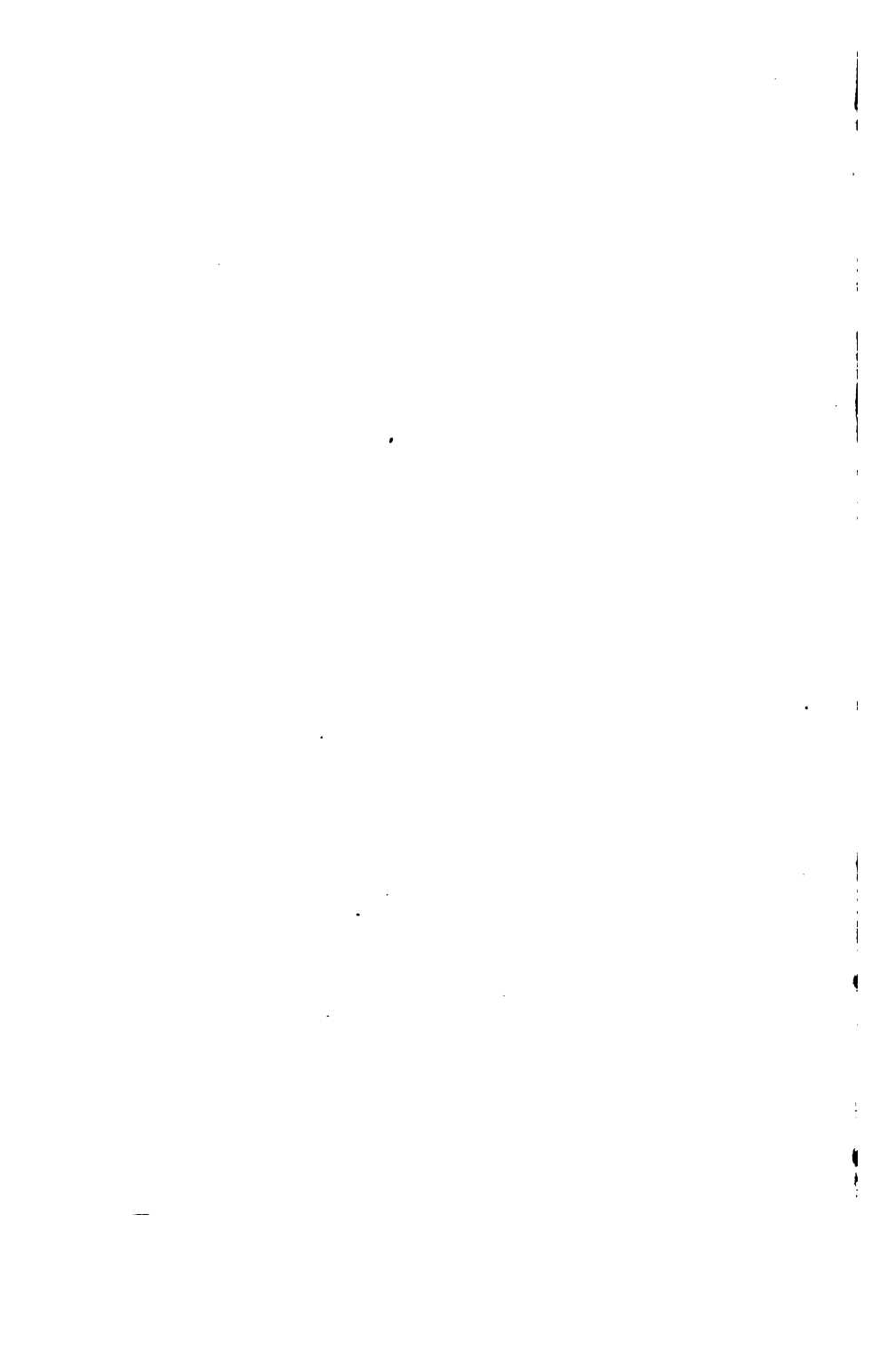
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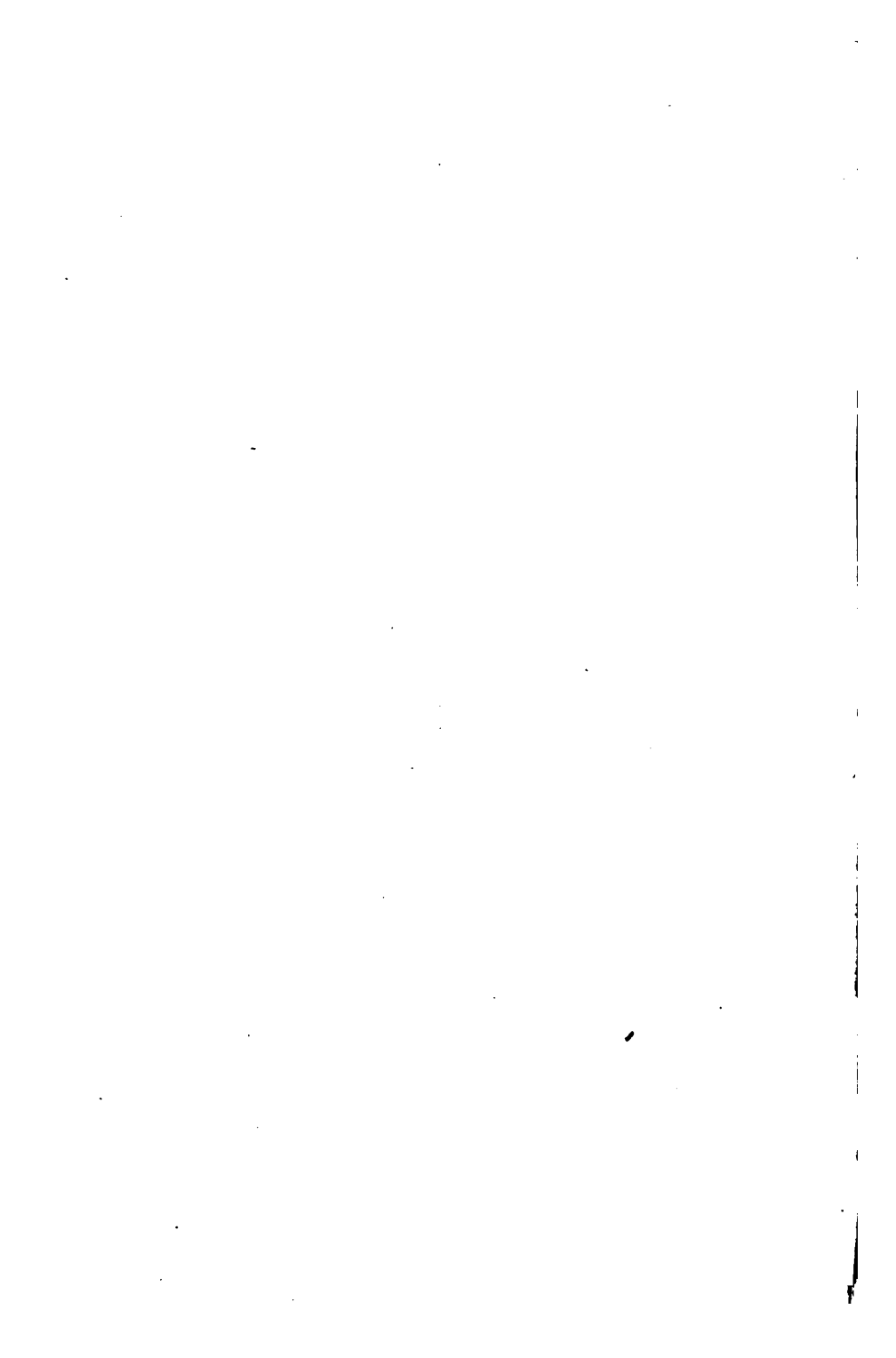






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## **A Modern Antique**









SIMONETTA. By ODDO PALMIERI.

# A Modern Antique

A Florentine Story

BY

RICCARDO NOBILI

*WITH FRONTISPIECE*

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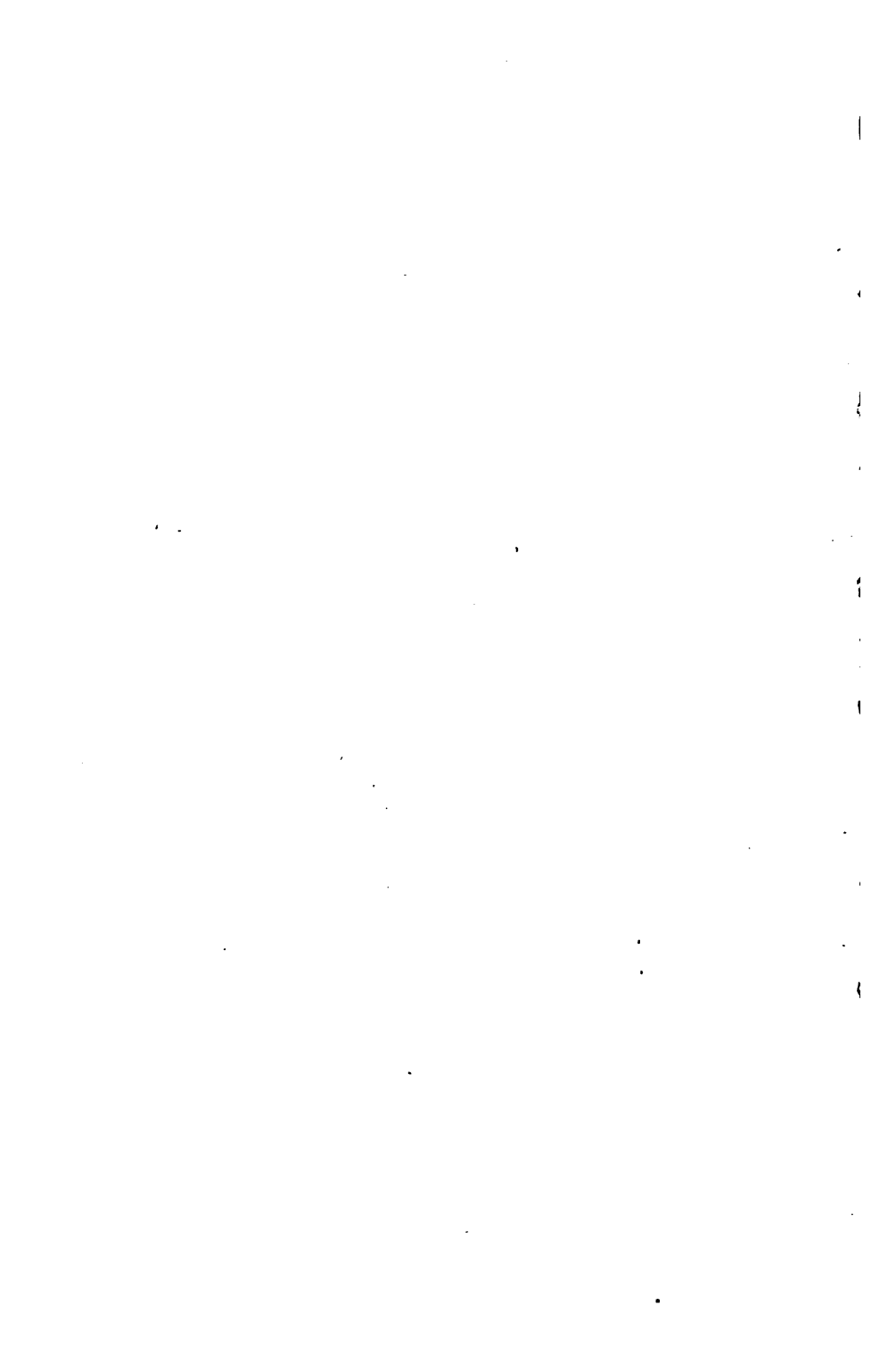
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*TO THE*  
*MEMORY OF MY WIFE.*

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## CHARACTERS.

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GASPERO BANDINI, Antiquarian.

ODDO PALMIERI, a Florentine.

COUNT ALBERTO SACOETTI.

ETTORE RUBELLI, Bandini's *alter ego*.

Mr JOHN GRAHAME, collector of antiques.

Mrs GRAHAME.

Miss HELEN GRAHAME.

Mr WADE, bric-à-brac hunter.

Mr BARTLETT, collector of objects of virtu.

Mr MITCHELL, connoisseur and art-critic.

Mr BOWLER, art-critic.

PRINCE TOSINGHI.

PRINCESS ISIDORA TOSINGHI.

LIEUTENANT GUARDAFOSSI.

CAVALIERE SANTACROCE.

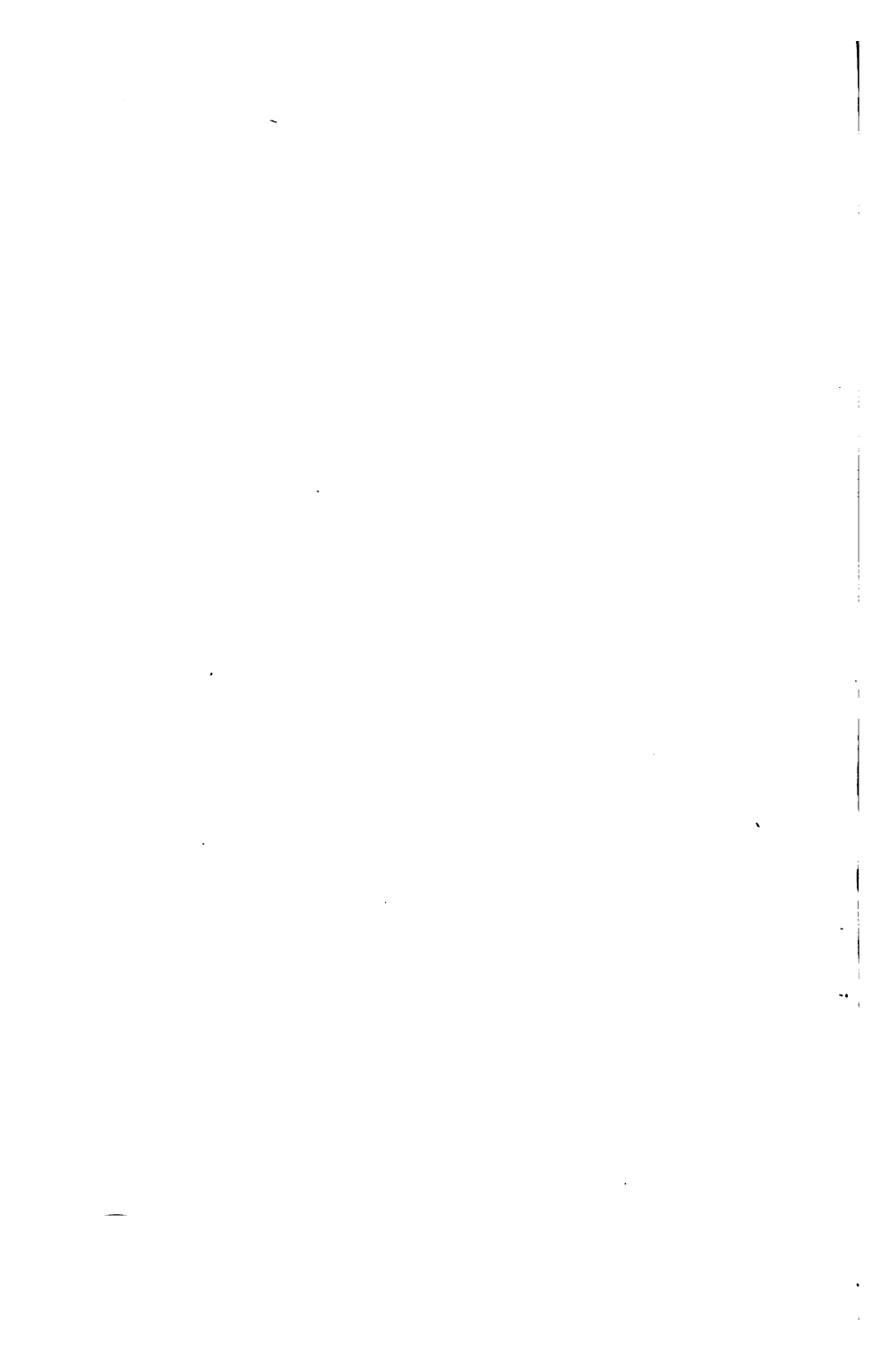
DON GAETANO TEGOLI, a country priest.



**PART FIRST**  
**FLORENCE**



**PART FIRST**  
**FLORENCE**



## CHAPTER I.

### A DEBT OF HONOUR.

THE postman had delivered three letters at the "Villa degli Olmi."

Oddo Palmieri laid them on his desk, all in a line, and, impelled by a certain spirit of speculation peculiar to his character, was puzzling over the possibility of the three missives representing three nuisances.

After a moment of thought he observed, "Strange how even letters hidden in plain envelopes have a certain physiognomy."

And no doubt the three pieces of white paper scribbled with the address had different characters.

The first envelope, for instance, was small, and the stamp, placed on the reverse side where the missive is sealed, seemed to mount guard over the inviolability of the secret.

Palmieri picked the letter up, looked at the address, which was scribbled as if a stormy wind had disarranged the regular slant of the words, put the letter to his nose, and said, "This is from my old nurse,

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asking for the usual five francs. Her husband has posted it,—I know by the smell of the tobacco from his pipe."

"What can Princess Isidora want?" he asked himself, recognising the handwriting of the second letter and the unmistakable perfume his cousin Donna Isidora Tosinghi used. "Perhaps one of the usual charity fairs, which means at least fifty francs out of my pocket. But—no, it is an invitation to the *mi-carême* ball. What a bother! I suppose I must go, or she will be cross, and a cross cousin isn't desirable. Well, I'll have to sport that evening suit again. I really had hoped to live a quiet life for a while."

The third letter, even for an expert like Palmieri, proved to be a poser. He had never seen the handwriting before: it was an incognito; and an incognito rarely brings pleasant surprises. The letter appeared to him like an intruder, a strange unknown voice, which might break the silence of his "Villa degli Olmi" and the peace of his studies.

Putting the ivory knife inside the envelope, with a decided stroke he cut it open, and unfolding the letter, looked at the signature.

"Alberto!" he exclaimed.

"What on earth has he to tell in such a long story?"

The letter was from his cousin, Count Alberto Sacchetti, a well-known scamp of Florentine society, a confirmed gambler, and an inveterate night-hawk of shady places. However, he was not considered a bad character: it was known that his heart was better



than his head. But he was one of those so-called good fellows who do no end of bad things.

"Knowing that this letter might fall into the hands of my inquisitive aunt," wrote Saccetti, "I have asked Fanny to address it."

Fanny Delmar was a ballet-girl only too well known to Florentine scandals, who, like a wise one of her class, after several risky adventures, sought and obtained the protection of a paladin—Count Alberto Saccetti.

"I had vowed," wrote Saccetti, "never to enter the Club again; so, passing through Via Tornabuoni, I quickened my steps that I might get beyond the terrible influence of the green table and not again yield to temptation.

"But destiny, worst enemy of my life, decided otherwise. I was fated to meet Count Scartabelli the other night. As I passed the door of the Club he happened to be coming out to mail a letter. We shook hands, and his fingers, fresh from the contact of cards, gave me a shock; the very air around him smelt of the gambling-table, just as the fresh air of the outside world seems to follow a person who suddenly enters a room.

"But I will not annoy you with my comparisons that—only a gambler can understand. The end of the matter was that I accompanied Scartabelli to mail his letter, and a few minutes later I was making my triumphal entry into the Club, arm-in-arm with my friend."

The tragic description of his loss then followed,

embellished with endless terms of justification. But all his arguments, of which the chief was bad luck, could not disguise the sad truth that Saccetti had given his I.O.U. for five thousand liras.

Leaving the Club disgusted, he had ended his evening at the café with a packet of cigarettes and several glasses of cognac, till he felt it was time for bed.

"Night gives advice," says an Italian proverb, and with this axiom Saccetti had cynically gone to bed.

"You know, my dear cousin, that people of our class invariably pay debts of honour, so——"

"So Count Saccetti is asking me for a loan," observed the reader, turning the page over with the peculiar chilly sensation felt by a man studying the easiest way to get out of a difficulty.

"But," Saccetti added, "I have paid the last cent, vowing to myself never to touch a card again.

"It may interest you to know how I got square with my creditors before the twenty-four hours had elapsed. The next morning, as you can imagine, I woke up very late, with a terrible headache, my brain confused. I believe that I should have forgot everything, even to the calamity of the evening before, but for my empty pockets, which made me realise that the five thousand must be paid as soon as possible.

"But how ?

"To go to my lawyer Tarocchi and ask him to find the sum on the already mortgaged Palazzo Saccetti would have been enough to make him laugh, so I dismissed the idea at once.

"Let me see, I thought, if there is anything left

worth selling in the dreary rooms of my palace. Surely everything was not sold at my father's death.

"It was at that moment I decided to call in the antiquarian Gaspero Bandini, the man you detest, but, after all, the only person who could help me under the circumstances.

"Though not a connoisseur, as you are, I am to some little extent a judge of antiquities. So, armed with pencil and paper, I proceeded to note what I might get from a gleaning among the remains left after the great cyclone that, as you will bear in mind, occurred after the death of my father, the last of the Saccetti who could make some decent debts.

"The four tapestries in the dining-room—you will remember them—are of a rather late epoch. That scoundrel, Bandini, refused to buy them at the time he came to ransack the house; but they are large, and with pleasant subjects as designs. Considering that times have changed for the better, they are certainly worth five hundred francs apiece.

"The large Sèvres clock, that Bandini also refused because of it being of the eighteenth century—just as if he expected to have a Sèvres of François I.—is certainly, to estimate it at low value, worth five hundred francs.

"The Empire fan of Grandmother Isabella, a gift to her from the great Napoleon, might be valuable for its miniatures, though not for the historical association. Antiquarians and traders are, as a rule, great despisers of historical and family souvenirs.

"So I jotted down another hundred francs for the fan, plus ten for the souvenir of the great Napoleon.

"Then came the painting of Ribera; I know you used to say that the subject was terrible, that no one would hang it in a room,—a man flayed by the most atrocious-looking Turks,—yet Spagnoletto was an artist who understood his work. So, to be brief, putting this canvas together with all the small things I could find, I saw plainly that I could demand my five thousand francs.

"All these calculations finished, I went to Bandini's house, in Via Valfonda, rang the bell, and a minute later disappeared in that mysterious den.

"In your antipathy for Gaspero Bandini you have never tried to see his house, and there you are wrong! For I can assure you that, from a certain point of view, it is a most striking building, and a most interesting one,—so much so that it would be a pity if the aldermen of our commune got it into their heads to widen Via Valfonda. No; posterity ought not to be robbed of such a curiosity. If a man had been a professional thief, and in later years had turned—why not?—to architecture, he might have been inspired to construct such a labyrinth. You can hardly have an idea of it: big doors, small doors that are hardly seen in the wall, trap-doors and winding staircases, concealed closets and darker places of abode where people appear and disappear like spectres. There is no shaking off the queer sensation you have within those walls.

"I believe it is not an easy matter for a stranger to

see the suspicious Signor Gaspero. Indeed, I believe that to surmount the seven walls of Mecca would be child's play to threading the twisted corridors of that house.

"But the colossal booty that Bandini secured after the death of my father gives me the right of feeling no stranger in Via Valfonda.

"After I had replied to an ogre-like voice that asked me, from a secure corner, what I wanted, I was admitted within the second precincts, where Rubelli—I believe an *alter ego* of the Antiquarian—received me with a smiling face and delivered a pack of flimsy excuses about his master.

"I handed my card, and repeated the same old story to this Cerberus of the second gate.

"Five minutes later Rubelli accompanied me to the reception-room with its yellow hangings and gaudy furniture.

"Just in front of the chair where I had seated myself there stood two statues on pedestals—one of a Roman senator with a nose too long even for an edile, and an expression as if he were about to sneeze,—an expression fully justified in that cold room with a fine chimney-place but no fire. The other bust was a satyr with a sarcastic grimace that seemed to advise me to go away, as I was no man to cope with his *padrone*. I don't know why I speak to you of those busts that made such an impression upon me, unless it is because they kept me company while I was shivering in the room.

"In about an hour Gaspero Bandini appeared. I

noticed that his mouth is wider than that of his *alter ego*, Rubelli, and his grin therefore broader. Really the satyr that was so good as to help me to pass that dreary hour is not so much of a satyr when compared with his master.

"However, after a cordial good morning, he cheerfully inquired—

"'Again in debt?'

"I wonder who had informed him.

"After I had explained the purpose of my call, he answered in a way to make me believe there was nothing left in my palace worthy of a visit, or, rather, of taking up his time. But after having delivered a lengthy speech about his great friendship with my poor father, he agreed, in consideration of his friendship, to come at three o'clock.

"Have you ever seen Bandini close? He looks like an eagle that has been compelled to fast through Lent. His eyes are as shiny as the heads of two nails fixed in his skull to hold a disproportionate hooked nose.

"The man has an expression which really makes one fear, and you may believe that I am not so easily frightened.

("Yes, I admit that," observed Palmieri.)

"There is one merit that cannot be denied to Bandini; he is punctual to a minute. The Sèvres clock was striking three—alas! for the last time—when he ascended the staircase of my palace.

"Of course I was prepared for his opening speech: 'Bad business nowadays; not like it was in olden

times.' All served with the *sauce piquante* of friendship. He called to memory my poor father, spoke of his great esteem for him, and said how unfortunate that the Saccetti were compelled to part with such a fine collection.

"After a long, keen examination he offered me three thousand francs.

"'No more?' I asked.

"'Not one penny,' was his answer. 'I have already set a fancy price, in memory of your worthy father.'

"Sycophant! I thought. But as he had made up his mind to that sum, I accepted, wondering where I should find the other two thousand francs.

"But to conclude: I was signing the receipt when I happened to notice that Bandini was looking at the bust you made and sent here.

"That clay bust seemed to have a real fascination for him. He put on his eye-glasses, and looked at it intensely as if he wished to grasp from the clay countenance the secret of its existence.

"After closer examination he said, 'The lines are hard, but it is not bad.' I thought to myself, 'he believes the bust antique,' and a devilish idea entered my head.

"'It is not bad,' I suggested. 'I didn't offer it to you because it is half promised to Count de Rose, who is coming to Florence for *mi-carême*.'

"At this statement he appeared to be very indifferent; and taking the receipt from me, which, after examining the signature, he folded with care and put

it into his pocket. Then he looked again at the bust and remarked—

“‘I am sorry you have sold that bust.’

“‘It is not actually disposed of,’ I answered.

“‘Well, the bust is hard, not a *chef-d’œuvre*; but the matter of fact is, that I have a portrait in clay of a gentleman of the same epoch, and I should like to make the pair. How much do you ask?’

“‘Five thousand francs.’

“‘I see you are inclined to joke. Look here; as I am in a hurry and have no time to haggle over this business, there are two thousand francs,’ and with these words he took from his pocket-book two crisp one-thousand-franc notes.

“‘You know I am no Spartan. I really have had a strong antipathy for these people since we studied our Greek. Just fancy, what kind of furniture the Spartans used in their houses with Lyncurgus laws only allowing carpenters to use the axe and the saw.

“‘However, those two thousand-franc notes had a very comprehensible eloquence, and in no time Bandini was carefully pocketing another receipt and was off with the bust.

“‘Naturally, I consider myself your debtor for the two thousand francs, and will do my best to repay you some time. As for the bust, you can make another: it cost you about three days’ work. So I have already written your man that he can come here in a fortnight. There is even time to bake the bust if you dry the clay near the chimney.

“‘Vale, my preserver!—Your cousin,

“ALBERTO.”



A string of profanity followed the reading of this letter.

"Rascal!" ejaculated Palmieri; "I your creditor? Fancy, such a debtor. 'You can make another bust.' The idea! as if making a work of art, good or bad, were as simple as writing this letter of yours."

The first impression over, another sentiment arose—a rather flattering one. If the work itself, apart from any suggestion of the place, had deceived Bandini's keen eye, it must be good. To cheat Bandini was not an easy task.

The word "cheat" came hard to his mind.

Yes, it was a case of cheating, and Alberto was guilty.

"Curse gambling!" said Palmieri; and, going to the table, he took his pen and wrote a letter to his cousin Saccetti.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE RESULT OF A DISCUSSION.

ODDO PALMIERI was a rare type of manhood, tall and slender, with brown eyes and hair that harmonised with his clear olive complexion. He certainly had an original character. Born either too early or too late, as somebody had said, he had not the same ideas as his fellows, nor was he disposed to see things in the light of his surroundings.

At the death of his father he found himself involved in debts, but, contrary to the general rule, he made the Spartan resolve to pay them. Nobody understood what a sacrifice of pride the decision cost him, nor could any one imagine his feelings when the historical palace, in possession of his family for centuries, fell into the hands of his father's creditors.

When every debt had been paid, Palmieri was not left penniless: a large farm in Chianti and a possession in Mugello were rescued from the financial disaster, as well as the beautiful "Villa degli Olmi," near San Domenico, on the lovely hill of Fiesole. In this villa he took up his abode with his mother

when it became necessary to leave the palace in Florence.

In that cheerful retreat, lulled by his dreams of art and study, Palmieri seldom left his seclusion to appear in society. But an echo of the familiar gossip reached him through his mother, Donna Giulia, who, chinking it too late to change her style of life, had kept up with her old acquaintance and invariably attended her friends' receptions.

If anything disturbed the humour of Donna Giulia, it was the passion that her son had for learning. To spend days and weeks among books and paintings!

Certainly it was not becoming of a Palmieri, the son of Donna Giulia, born of a princely Roman family.

Her dream was for Oddo to be a grand *Signore*, which in Italy means to be an idler, and to be faithful to the so-called *buona società*.

"At least in society," Donna Giulia used to say, "Oddo might have met an American girl, lined with dollars."

Donna Giulia knew that more than one foreign goose had laid the golden egg that had saved a Florentine family just at the time the household conclave decreed it necessary to reduce the *pariglia* to one horse and dispense with the golden braid of the livery, or to be driven so far as to control with Argus eye the extravagances of the cook.

A rich American would settle the whole business, Donna Giulia had thought more than once. Oddo could buy back the palace and live like a prince.

Visions of the past floated before her, and in her dream she saw herself as in times gone by.

But when thinking of Oddo's character all her projects vanished. Oddo was always in the company of his books, and certainly it was not possible to find an heiress between the leaves of his volumes. "No, with his ideas my son will always be a nobody," was the invariable refrain of Donna Giulia.

Oddo was willing to accept this horoscope, if it meant his being left alone.

Society women found Palmieri a little too serious, but invariably remarked that he was awfully good-looking.

At the Club of the Nobility it had always been a question why he had refused to be a member. This refusal met the approbation of many rich *bourgeois* who had had no end of "black-balls" on their nomination to the Club. Indeed, these would-be members looked at the Club door of Via Tornabuoni with most envious eye. To be admitted they would have accepted a kick at each step of the staircase leading to the Club of the Nobility. The experiment might have proved painful, but after a certain number of kicks they were certain to reach the coveted Olympus.

Cavaliere Santacroce, one of Mrs Grundy's principal gossip-worshippers, had said of Palmieri—

"That young man has mistaken his career; he ought to have been a dealer in pictures. Were I in his place I should become a Director of some Museum. The thing might be easy enough through his cousin Alti, who is an influential man at the *Ministero dell*

*Istruzione.* The idea to be born a gentleman and waste his days scraping old pictures! In my time a gentleman was a gentleman, and that was enough."

Nobody ever took the trouble to ask Cavaliere Santacroce to what epoch the time he alluded to belonged, or learn the secret so jealously guarded under the impenetrable artificial black of his moustache; but more than one had hinted that the season of Santacroce belonged to the prehistoric era.

That Oddo Palmieri had a preference for the company of artists and those who were in some way connected with art was true. One of his friends asked him almost in a tone of reproof how he could associate with dealers in art. "Don't you know," said he, "they are a serious damage to our country? They disperse our artistic patrimony among foreigners."

"Yes, I do understand it," was the reply. "They may be professional, and earn their livelihood by trade, but you have sold them your Andrea del Sarto to buy an automobile and to encourage the ballet-dancer of the Alhambra."

But the one who could not resign herself to Oddo's fancies was Donna Giulia; and one day she went to consult with the old Marchese Ajazzi about her son.

Marchese Ajazzi was a nice old nobleman, who owed his reputation of being an oracle of wisdom chiefly to his white beard, his eyes like those of a prophet of the Bible, and a pair of bushy eyebrows that might have been envied by Charon himself. Ajazzi was the secular confessor of all the ladies who had admitted to having attained their fortieth year.

So Donna Giulia poured out her trouble into the bosom of the wise old Marquis.

"I must beg your pardon," said Ajazzi, "but your poor husband made a great mistake in Oddo's education. The idea of sending him to Paris to study sculpture, when he could have done the same thing here and soon got tired of it."

"But, dear Marchese," repeated Donna Giulia, shrugging her shoulders, "you don't know Oddo when he gets an idea into his head. My poor husband, as you're aware, was not of a strong character, and he gave in to Oddo's persuasion."

The Marchese began to stroke his silvery beard as if expecting that some idea would drop from its flowing folds. "Well, Donna Giulia, the Latin quarter is the Latin quarter, and one cannot live there three or four years, as Oddo did, without acquiring plebeian notions. I know Paris"—the Marquis had been an *attaché* under some petty Italian legation at the time of Louis Philippe—"I know Paris, and I know what I am talking about. When Oddo went to Paris I gave him a letter to the Italian Ambassador, the Marquis of Val-dore. Madame receives every Saturday, and that was sufficient to oblige Oddo to go into society occasionally. But, would you believe it, he never presented the letter. The Ambassador wrote me that they had not seen him." Two or three more strokes to his beard accentuated the Marquis's indignation at such a fact.

"Now, if Oddo would be a sculptor," continued Donna Giulia, "I think he has sufficient talent. But he is always beginning things which he never

finishes. It is a pity, because I believe he's clever. He has modelled a clay bust of his cousin Alti that seems really alive. Such a likeness! When I proposed his doing one of Countess Talli and Signorina Gattelli, two recognised beauties of our society, who would have been delighted with such an honour, Oddo refused on the ground that he was not a professional sculptor of official beauties. But if an antiquarian sends word that he has found a painting, or heaven knows what, he goes there as readily and eagerly as if a lady had given him a *rendez-vous*. Every day he has calls at the Villa from these indescribable people. If it were for me they came, I should like to show them the door."

The Marchese attempted to speak, but Donna Giulia went on as swiftly as a windmill—

"Just fancy, only a few days ago, Professor Celli, the painter who is always mixed up with old things, was telling me what a capital restorer of paintings Oddo was. *Misericordia!* Fancy! A Palmieri becoming a patcher up of old paintings. Why, it is too ridiculous!"

By this time Marchese Ajazzi had really thought of something, and said—

"Donna Giulia, I have an idea: have you ever tried to get him married?"

"Of course I have; but I can hardly repeat his answer, it is so ridiculous."

"What is it?"

"He says he is already married to his art."

"*Diavolo!*"

"That isn't all," said Donna Giulia, becoming warmer in the discussion. "He has a perfect mania for visiting museums. He is always going to the *Uffizi* and the *Bargello*, where he stays until he is actually put out by the guardians. He would go to Naples simply to compare a painting with another, and spends money like water. His administrator, Scalchi, could tell you a good deal more than I know. When he went to Madrid he spent a month there only to study Velasquez, and, would you believe it, never went to a court ball."

"*Santa Maria!*"

Donna Giulia, taking a matronly pose, and drawing her silk shawl closer about her person, added, with dignity, "It is fortunate I have my dowry and the *legittima*, otherwise I should be in constant fear that Oddo might sell the Mugello or the Chianti farm to buy a painting that had caught his fancy."

At this speech even Marchese Ajazzi thought that Donna Giulia in her excitement was going too far. "No, Donna Giulia, I cannot agree with you there; you see things in too dark a light. Oddo may be somewhat peculiar, but he is not a spendthrift. He has not a debt that I know of, and let me say that between Oddo and his cousin, Count Saccetti, there is a world of difference."

"That's true," she rattled on; "but his cousin Saccetti never omits a ball or a reception, and some day he'll meet with an American girl who will pay off all his debts."

With Donna Giulia this American wife was a sort



of mania. Columbus had discovered America for no other purpose, and from there the panacea that might heal the sorrow of Florentine nobility was bound to come.

The Marchese at this point motioned to Donna Giulia to stop talking as he wished to speak.

It was indeed the *responso* of the oracle.

"But—Donna Giulia," he said, "why don't you let him alone? If you let him alone this caprice may vanish easier than by annoying him. Let him meet a pair of fine eyes, a girl with one of those faces that would convert any impenitent bachelor, and you will see where this dream of art will go!"

Although Donna Giulia followed her friend's advice, not to annoy her son with matrimonial projects, she was always watching and waiting to see if on some far horizon the girl predicted by Marchese Ajazzi would appear.

Meanwhile the "Villa degli Olmi" had been arranged to suit the various tastes of the inmates. Donna Giulia occupied the *piano nobile*; Oddo had been allotted the ground floor. The large salon was considered a sort of neutral ground, where Donna Giulia held her receptions, in which Oddo, as a compromise and for peace, had promised to take part.

Friends and acquaintances had finished by yielding to Oddo's whims. He was, after all, only an art critic, and rather a useful person at times.

The idea of trying to model a bust in antique style had several times come into Oddo Palmieri's mind.

The decision was finally reached through a petty circumstance. One night on entering the Artists' Club a discussion on the imitation of the antique was at its height. The opponents were Centofanti, an old sculptor, and Perelli, a painter.

"It depends upon the moment and circumstances," Perelli was saying, "but with the excellent imitations they are making nowadays no one is safe in judging an object of art."

"You can keep that theory to yourself," replied Centofanti; "as for me, I don't believe it. Just fancy, even in the famous case of Bastianini, old Centofanti was not taken in. You cannot remember the case of Bastianini, when the work of that sculptor was bought for the Louvre as an antique. The bust of the old Florentine Girolame Benivieni, supposed to be a fine work of the time of Savonarola, was nothing else but a trick of Bastianini, whose model was an old workman in the cigar manufacturer's. But when Bastianini called me into his studio to see it, I said at once, 'This is not an antique, Bastianini; this is your work.' Now if Niewerkerque, the Director of the Louvre, had only consulted me, the museum would contain one forgery the less."

Perelli made no reply to this pompous speech, but sought refuge in his punch. There was silence in the gathering of friends, for every one knew that to argue with Centofanti meant to engage in a tiresome discussion with no conclusion.

Palmieri, who was unaware of this fact, and had

seen the bust of Bastianini at the Louvre, attempted to answer the conceited Centofanti.

"The bust of Bastianini is really the best imitation I know of, as far as workmanship is concerned. It is so good that I believe if, instead of seeing it in the hand of Bastianini, you had found it in the collection, say, of Marquis Deinelli, you might have been deceived, because you see—the suggestion——"

"Suggestion, pshaw! Go and relate such fables to art-writers or those who can be persuaded, but not to me who have modelling at the tips of my fingers. And if I don't understand my business yet, it is certain I shall not learn it from any of you youngsters. Better make your suggestion to the Directors of Galleries and Museums, who get their information on sculpture and painting out of books. I know what I am talking about."

Discussions among artists reach the acute period very soon, and are usually dissipated after the due amount of bawl. Thus later on quiet was restored. The only useful result of the discussion was that, in order to seal peace, *Veleno*, the waiter of the café, was called upon to bring several more dusty bottles.

That night Palmieri on his way to the Villa resolved to try a joke on the conceited Centofanti. His idea was to imitate a work of the fifteenth century. "I should like to know," he mused, "whether Centofanti is the connoisseur he boasts to be, or only a conceited ass."

## CHAPTER III.

## SIMONETTA.

"YES, that Centofanti is an ass, I am sure," ruminated Palmieri the morning after the discussion at the Artists' Club. "What if his opinion should be asked on an *imitation* in some old palace—and he doesn't suspect. The idea of posing as a first-rate connoisseur! Look at his Dante in Piazza Nazionale—a wooden puppet! Well, anyway, I'll try."

More and more engrossed with the idea, Palmieri had gone to the city the same morning, where he bought several plaster casts of the best works of the fifteenth century. There were the head of the *Giovinetta* by Rossellino, the bust of *Duchessa Sforza* attributed to Laurana, the fine unknown "Florentine lady" of Verrocchio, and several models from Desiderio da Settignano, Mino da Fiesole, and other old masters.

At Alinari's he secured all the material in the way of photographs that he thought might be of use to him in his effort.

He finished the morning at the Bargello, where were many of the originals of the casts he had just

bought. He hoped for an inspiration; marble with its pearly *patine* is more suggestive and enticing than the cold glaring reproduction in plaster. Then, too, with the original, you are impressed by a feeling that you are breathing with the very soul of the master.

The afternoon was spent in arranging the casts and looking at the photographs. When all was ready Simonetta was told to come to the studio the following morning.

Simonetta was the daughter of the gardener, a mere child with a frail delicate face which, in profile, closely resembled Botticelli's *La bella Simonetta*. Oddo having noticed the likeness had given her the name of Simonetta, which name had eventually superseded her real one.

Out of school she was always to be found at play in the orchard, singing like a lark, and jumping about with her long nimble legs, light as a grasshopper. Simonetta looked upon herself as a sort of partner in Oddo's artistic enterprise. Always ready to obey her master's order, she was a willing sitter when the fancy took him to handle the modelling stick.

If anything puzzled Simonetta, it was the fact that her master invariably destroyed his work at the end of the sitting.

She, too, had realised the sculptor's disillusion after having modelled a puppet in clay. She had tried hard to blow life into it, just in the same way that she had been taught in Sunday-school that the existence was

blown into the first man; the persistence of her master in such a negative work amazed her.

With her childish brain she could not reason, although she had seen the same act any number of times. The death-warrant of the work was invariably preceded by the phrase, "Simonetta, look at yourself for the last time." At first she was shocked at the idea of his destroying the work—some of those clay heads had such a real sense of life to her that she felt her master was committing murder; but after growing accustomed to the sacrifice she enjoyed witnessing it. It amused her to see the comical look the clay face assumed after it had received the fatal blow. Sometimes the face bore a winking expression, as if to challenge the foe to another stroke, but when the nose got the worse from the shock she laughed heartily.

If Simonetta had something like an adoration for her *Padrone* (an Italian name, the meaning of which cannot be interpreted in any other language), she had a dread of Donna Giulia with her scolding and everlasting complaints.

Hidden behind a tree or under some bush, she could hear the penetrating voice of her mistress saying, "These flowers must have wings; where do they fly to?" But what cared the master how many bunches of salad disappeared from the orchard, or if a few violets and lilies found their way to the Florentine market.

That morning, on entering the studio, Simonetta was surprised to see the new arrangement. All those

white and motionless busts encircling her place looked to her like a school of stiff and petrified girls.

"Sit there," said the master, not noticing the bewildered expression of the girl, "and look at me." She obeyed, taking the steady pose of an experienced model.

With the clay already shaped in a rough embryo of a bust Palmieri set to work.

From the first strokes an unknown power seemed to take hold of him, and he was conscious that his heart and soul were at his finger-tips. The clay was unusually obedient to his touch; he felt a sense of voluptuousness in creating form. Every stroke added meaning to his work. Never before had he felt so bold in facing difficulties; never before had Art, siren that she was, appeared to him with more winning smile,—that same alluring smile which had deceived legions of worshippers.

But Oddo felt that he had the "moly" and was ready to challenge his Circe.

An unknown spark kindled in his eye; Simonetta was staring at him with wonder.

"What's the matter, Simonetta?"

"I was thinking why you make such big eyes."

"Hold your head up, in this way," and Oddo made a motion to illustrate the desired position.

So intense was the fever he had for his work that he had not noticed the child was tired, and poor Simonetta kept on looking at her master with her wondering blue eyes.

He began to study the plaster busts, going close

from one to another as if to catch the artistic sentiment of each one. To Simonetta it appeared like the children's school game called "secrets."

One thing that pleased her was to watch the progress of the modelling; it seemed to her as if her form was slowly coming from out a shell, and her master was urging vitality into lifeless clay. Indeed it appeared as if Oddo was divesting the superfluous clay, the chrysalis as it were of the form already concrete in his mind.

Noticing a languid expression in Simonetta's eyes—the dreamy vision of the Rossellino bust—he went nearer, as if to search her deep blue eyes for the secret of that mysterious look. He held his breath, gave a few bold strokes; then he stood at a distance and scrutinised his work with approving satisfaction.

He told Simonetta to rest.

"Poor little one, you must be tired," he said, seeing for the first time her haggard face.

The child was playing with the syringe used for wetting the clay. As a reward for sitting quiet the operation of squirting water on the bust had been assigned to Simonetta, who thought the trick great fun.

"Aren't you tired?"

"No, master, I don't think I am; but if you don't mind I'll go play with the lizards just a few minutes."

"Go, but come back in about an hour." He handed her a package of chocolate, adding, "Keep some for to-morrow."



When, later, Oddo opened the door into the garden, the girl appeared to him as if in a flood of light; the contrast with the cold north light of the studio was striking; the rays of the sun seemed playfully entwining with the bright blond hair of the child. What painter could fix on canvas such a marvellous effect? he thought with the artist's melancholy.

In the open air, while humming a *stornello*, Simonetta drew out a chocolate from the deep pocket of her petticoat and nibbled slowly so as to make it last a long time.

One of the peculiarities of Oddo's artistic temperament made him either too enthusiastic or too adversely critical about his work. That morning he had felt the impulse of a genius. After spending a time in quiet contemplation of the great master's work, his spirit had cooled down and he realised his own inferiority,—the bust that in the early morning had pleased him looked now like a wooden doll.

When Simonetta came back so full of life and joy the contrast was appalling and utterly unfavourable to his work. He felt exasperated with himself at having cheated his own eyes, and a desperate wish to destroy the proof of his conceit possessed him.

With his fist in the air he began the consecrated phrase, "Now, Simonetta, look——" when, to his astonishment, she grasped his arm and cried—

"Don't, master; don't spoil it, it is so beautiful".

Her daring surprised him; but looking at the pleading face of the girl he hesitated, and, dropping his

arm, said, "Well, Simonetta, it shall be as you wish, and you can go for to-day."

The child ran off as joyful as if she had saved a life.

Oddo gave another glance at the bust, so beneath the work of the masters. He had taken such a hatred of it that he felt like smashing everything within his reach. He closed the studio, determined not to come back that day.

The next morning Oddo found Simonetta playing with pebble stones on the steps of his studio door, throwing them in the air and catching them on the back of her hand.

"We'll not work to-day," he said, "so you can go to school."

Simonetta started off, then, seeing Oddo unlocking the door, she ran back and said softly, "Master, remember what you promised."

Removing the wet cloth from the head, and looking at it with fresh eye, Oddo found the impression not a bad one: there certainly was vitality, and he was vaguely reminded of the work of the *quattrocento*. Indeed, as a whole, it had much the same influence upon the beholder as the work of the old masters. The unique spark of their art was in the air and Oddo's skill had caught it.

Again Oddo stood before the old masters and felt like caressing a perfectly-shaped head by Mino. The solidity of the modelling of Desiderio da Settignano enchanted him. There was a certain charm in passing his hand over the cast of his *Ritratto di Giovinetta*;

surely there were bones and muscles; it was certain that the clever hand that had given shape to that form must have followed the same lines. He had a dim sentiment that the dead hand of the old master was reviving in his. A chill ran through his veins, a cold sweat came out upon his forehead when he felt that he was not alone,—that his soul and strength were in tune with some unknown mystery. But, forcing his brain to logic of reason, he murmured, "I must be dreaming." But a new impulse, a stronger wave of feeling, sent him back to the clay that held the mystery of so many forms; a hypnotic current seemed to have established a close connection between the clay and all the wondrous works that faced him.

A voice entered in his soul, like an echo, bidding him "Work."

How long Palmieri had remained concentrated in labour he hardly knew himself. The voice of Simonetta, back from school, awoke him and brought him out of a nebulous sphere. He looked at the bust, and the more he looked the more he wondered if it was his own work. He vaguely remembered that he had given a bold stroke to the dimple of the mouth, impressed by the angel-like modelling of Mino da Fiesole; he recollected, too, having bent the head back so as to give it the haughty air of the Duchess Sforza by Laurana, and that Desiderio da Settignano had suggested a happy accentuation of the cheekbone. But the whole work was so well blended in its different qualities that the effect was something that Oddo could not explain.

Simonetta entered the studio.

"Look, master, what I have found!" she said, and, opening her long spider-like fingers, she displayed in the palm of her hand a coin all covered with green smalt of oxidation. "It is '*buona fortuna*.'"

"Why, it is a *bajocco*," said Oddo, examining it; "a *bajocco*—a coin of the Pope. There, I'll give you that in exchange," and he handed her a franc.

"I'll put it in the *salvadanaro*" (the saving box), she said; "it will help to buy the white dress for my first communion."

The day after Oddo gave the finishing touches to his work, and neatly designed the pattern of the old damask on the bodice.

The bust baked in an oven at Mugello; Oddo had skilfully coated it with an excellent "*patine*" and sent it to his cousin Alberto, who had willingly accepted the part of *compare* in the joke to the sculptor Centofanti when Gaspero Bandini dropped at the Saccetti Palace.

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE TOSINGHI BALL.

THE *mi-carême* ball at the palace of Prince Tosinchi was the coming event of the Florentine season.

It was a fact that, after Carnival had duly been buried amid yawns at the *Veglione* of the Pergola, the only great amusement in prospect was the ball of mid-Lent. A few days after Ash Wednesday, when Paquin and Felix received fresh orders from Florence, they were invariably followed by the codicil, "*Prière d'être prêt pour la mi-carême.*"

No rival would have dared to give a ball on that night in opposition to the one of the Princess, so magnificently consecrated by success and tradition. A foreign lady, famous for her entertainments, had once tried the experiment, but fled to Nice the day after to digest her defeat.

The Tosinchi had all the good qualities that might be credited to Florentine aristocracy. Among the many merits of the Princess she had this rare one—she was a Florentine; she had always lived in Florence, and had remained a Florentine. The

French craze of the Second Empire, the mania for aping British customs that succeeded later, had not taken hold in the Palazzo Tosinghi. Courteous, easy, and a trifle democratic, as true descendants of the once republican city, the Tosinghi were liked by everybody.

The palace, built in the fifteenth century over the stronghold that had formed the mansion in earlier and more troublesome times, witnessed in its various vicissitudes to the history of the family. The palace had undergone reparation, with much defacing, at the end of the sixteenth century. Later on a Cardinal of the Tosinghi had transformed the interior and the façade, giving it a rich and affected Barocco style. The two great artists, Time and Weather, had harmonised the colour, bringing out the chiaroscuro and causing the mansion to acquire a venerable air.

It was perhaps owing to its imposing character that, when progress demanded modern luxuries, the architect had not dared to suggest any modification of the façade.

The night of *mi-carême*, carriage after carriage drove slowly toward the grand entrance of the Tosinghi Palace, from where a torrent of light could be seen pouring into the street. A crowd of loungers, curious to see the ladies arriving in their carriages, obstructed the way, and were continually being hustled along by the guards.

From the top of the staircase the heroic statue of Cardinal Tosinghi looked down. The ample gown

hung in elaborate folds, and the statue of his Eminence bore a noble air, and his countenance seemed that of a smiling host. From the base of the statue, where the Tosinghi coat-of-arms showed conspicuously in its rich elaborate escutcheon, the staircase, crowned by a marble balustrade, parted into two symmetrical branches coming down with snake-like lazy curve. The manner of Bernini was to be seen in everything—from the rich folds of the Cardinal's garment, looking like either silk or paper, to the heavy frieze of the ceiling.

The Princess was receiving her guests at the head of the staircase with that charm which comes from traditional high breeding. She looked every inch the *grande dame*, passing a pleasant word with every arrival. Seeing Palmieri, she exclaimed—

"*Come va Oddo*. I was sorry to hear Donna Giulia wasn't coming. She wrote a letter of four pages to tell me it was time for Leopoldo to stop giving this sinful mid-Lent ball. I wasn't anticipating the pleasure of seeing the anchorite of Villa degli Olmi; but I'm glad you've come."

"You know, cousin Isidora, my mother has scruple fits, occasionally she recollects that she springs from a family of *codini*. I thought you would expect me, for I've never yet missed one of your balls. Then Prince Leopoldo isn't here. When is he coming back?"

"As soon as he knows if the Conservatives have been beaten by the Radicals. He says it isn't safe to leave Rome till the Cabinet has received

a *voto di fiducia* from Parliament. He writes me he is going to reopen Montegalli. Aren't you surprised?"

"Reopen Montegalli, the villa at Chianti? Write and ask if I can go with him that day. It will be as curious to see it opened as to watch an excavation at Pompeii."

Palmieri, passing through salons that were suffocating with the strong perfume of flowers, reached the ballroom, lavish with gold and stucco ornaments. Above the balcony where the orchestra was playing, and over the black rampant lion of the Tosinghi, could be seen the characteristic hat of the Cardinal.

The four large iridescent chandeliers of old Murano cast a hazy light upon the many forms gliding over the polished floor.

"Alberto must be there," thought Oddo, looking at the dancers, aware that nothing could keep his cousin from a social function.

"Why, this is most remarkable!" and the hand of Count Scartabelli, his cousin's friend, was laid on Palmieri's shoulder.

"Where is Alberto?" Oddo asked him.

"He is dancing with the little Countess Talli. You ought to see her: she is a perfect wonder, with all her sparkling diamonds. A real miraculous Madonna covered with *ex-voto*."

"I don't see her nor the *ex-voto*."

"There; they are just passing on the other side. She is all in white. Look—Alberto is so tall that,



bending over the little Countess, he looks as if he were stooping to pick something up."

"I see her now. She knows how to dress. Every brunette and widow shows at her best in white."

"Do you know that Alberto Saccetti has lost five thousand liras at the Club?"

"Yes, I heard of it."

"Perhaps, then, you were the kind friend who came to the rescue. He paid his debt so promptly that everybody was surprised."

"I, too, was surprised." And with this ambiguous answer Oddo left Scartabelli and went in search of his cousin. The orchestra had ceased to play. Oddo, seeing Countess Talli and Saccetti going to the buffet, followed them.

When Saccetti returned, bringing a glass of champagne to the Countess, he found her in conversation with Palmieri.

"Hullo, Oddo!" he said, unconcerned and quite as if nothing had happened, "what have you been doing with yourself lately?"

"Chasing *ignis fatuus*!"

"You have been to the Artists' Club, I suppose? I hear they are going to give one of their balls next week. Countess, you ought to see some of those artists crucified in their evening suits. I should advise them to stick to their blouse and tam-o'-shanter. By the way, I remember now, you wrote, Oddo, that you wanted to see me."

"Your memory is excellent. Yes, I should like to have a word with you to-night."

"You have secrets, then?" said the Countess to Alberto Saccetti after Oddo had left them.

"Oh, no. But my stiff-necked cousin is my eternal mentor. He always has a sermon *in pectore* to deliver. I wish you could hear him moralising sometimes. His greatest ambition is to convert the world."

They entered the ballroom together for the second time. Mrs Grundy frowned; but Saccetti and the Countess Talli were accustomed to Mrs Grundy's scowls.

Later on Oddo, determining to have it out with his cousin, went to the ballroom, where he found him busy tying two chairs together for the cotillon.

"Here I am," said Alberto; "but don't waste time. Put it in a nutshell; I can't keep my partner waiting."

The two men made their way to the smoking-room, where they could talk without being heard.

"Well, what on earth is the matter?" Alberto asked.

"I want to know in what form you wrote the receipt for the bust."

"In the usual form, of course."

"What is the usual form?"

"Received two thousand francs for an antique bust——"

"Antique?"

"Yes; why not? If I had said *modern*, he wouldn't have looked at it."

"But you don't seem to realise the enormity of the thing."

"Well, Bandini sells any amount of false antiques

to Americans. I've played the same game, and treated him *à l'Américaine*."

"What is the use of trying to talk with an absolute idiot!"

"Excuse me—if Bandini couldn't tell that your bust was modern why should I trouble myself to explain? That's his business, not mine."

"Your indifference is incredible," Oddo answered irritably. "To-morrow I shall go to Gaspero Bandini to claim my bust and refund the money. I ask only one thing of you. Give me your solemn word not to see Bandini again."

"I promise upon my honour," answered Alberto, glad enough to escape with so slight a sacrifice.

When after a while Princess Tosinghi entered the room she said to Palmieri—

"I want a partner for a young lady. I have been looking for you, Oddo, to introduce you to a pretty American girl. Alberto, the scandal of the evening, is of course already engaged."

"You have nothing better to offer, cousin?"

"My dear, be assured, she is charming! You are just the one, because you speak English."

Owing to his mother's mania on the subject of Americans, Palmieri suspected for a moment that there was a plot brewing between Donna Giulia and the Princess Isidora; but as he looked at the latter's honest face he dismissed the idea.

"Come," she said, "Miss Grahame is in the large salon with her mother."

"I wasn't aware of the fact that American girls had mothers—they are getting fashionable," commented Alberto, "but the father surely is always missing, fashion or no fashion."

"What impertinence!" cried the Princess. "Go to your Countess!"

Later Palmieri was introduced to the Grahames. He offered his arm to the daughter, and went off with her to search a place for the cotillon.

"My cousin tells me this is your first visit to Florence," Oddo remarked for the sake of saying something as they took their places.

The orchestra had already begun the first waltz.

"Yes, it is my first visit to Florence, but I don't feel that I am quite a stranger. My uncle, Mr Grahame, has lived in Italy for years, and I've heard him talk about Florence ever since I was a child. It has been my dream to see Italy. We hardly expected to meet Florentines, but we knew the Princess Tosinchi at Nice, and she has been good enough to remember us."

She fixed her beautiful eyes on Palmieri; the look went through him like a blade.

"What wonderful eyes," he said to himself.

And they talked about the winter in Nice and the passion the Princess Tosinchi had for the Riviera.

The conversation ran the usual ballroom course. Miss Grahame praised the uniform of Italian officers, and spoke of the brilliant show they made in a room.

A splendidly-arrayed officer of the Royal Piedmont Regiment passed by.

"There's Lieutenant Guardafossi," said Miss Grahame.

"You know him?"

"Yes; I was talking with him this evening. When he heard I was from New York he asked me if I ever met Miss Brown of San Francisco."

"I fear," Oddo laughed, "Guardafossi is better acquainted with horses than with geography. Perhaps he imagined that going from New York to San Francisco is like crossing the Arno."

Lieutenant Guardafossi, gleaming from epaulettes to spurs, strutted like a peacock to where Miss Grahame was, and kneeling, offered a gilded heart. It was the favour for the next figure. Hearts and nets had been distributed to the men, while the ladies had either arrows to pierce the hearts or butterflies to be caught in nets.

She rose from her seat, and darting her arrow into the heart as indifferently as she would have passed a pin through her hat, waltzed off with the young officer.

Palmieri, following the dancers with his eyes, observed the slender figure of Miss Grahame, who was simply yet elegantly gowned. A slight sentiment of jealousy stung him, and he found himself wishing that the big bristol-board heart had been allotted to him instead of a net. The unwished-for butterfly came in the brilliant form of Countess Talli, who said—

"Won't you catch this butterfly?"

"Butterfly is just the name for the Countess,"

thought Palmieri while waltzing. When the round was finished and he had thanked her, the little beauty whispered, "An American! dear Donna Giulia will be happy."

With the proper expression of a bored man Oddo went back to his place. He felt himself ridiculous, thinking how thoroughly his mother had aired her matrimonial projects. But he could not refrain from drawing a mental comparison between this charming natural foreigner and the girls of his society. "Why is it that our girls appear, or rather act, like either married women or nuns?"

America had already gained considerable ground.

By this time Miss Grahame had returned to her place, and while the figure of the cotillon proceeded in another part of the ballroom, she and Palmieri went on with their conversation.

Though Miss Grahame had read much about Florence, she found the young Italian a mine of information. As he finished a story about some old Florentine palace, Palmieri noticed on her face a half-puzzled look.

"But you aren't a Florentine?"

"Yes, I am. Why not?"

"Because you know so much about Florence."

Oddo laughed at this; and she went on—

"Since I came to Florence I have asked any number of questions about monuments and works of art, but I am generally answered by a shrug of the shoulder and 'I don't know.' Lieutenant Guardafossi acknowledged to me, with quite a self-satisfied smile, that he had not

been inside the Uffizi Gallery since his tutor took him there as a boy at school. It doesn't seem possible!"

"But what is more incredible than truth?" Palmieri said. "Only foreigners visit our museums. Perhaps it is better so. If Florentines should become interested in their own city they might be tempted to beautify the Palazzo Vecchio with a coat of white-wash. When the Commune voted for the destruction of the Mercato, it was such a vandal proceeding that it seemed as if the whole outside world protested."

"Yes, I remember, and I think my uncle, who is an art-collector, must have been one of them."

"And that is by no means all. Among the notable buildings destroyed was the residence of the Guild of the Physicians and the Loggia del Pesce—loggia of fishmongers—the Palazzo della Cavolaia,—even our lovely hills have not been respected. A worthy Englishman has transformed a poetic ruin at Vincigliata into a castle fit for Punch and Judy; an antiquarian of Florence has changed the sacred watch-tower of Galileo into the most grotesque bric-à-brac shop that ever took the shape of a castle, where, to mention the least of its incongruities, the Florentine Marzocco winks at the Panther of Lucca, and the Eagle of the Duke of Ferrara is astride the Lion of Saint Mark. But it is a matter of taste, as Harlequin remarked when eating a cake of soap."

Between the rounds of a gay waltz and a dull one time passed agreeably. Palmieri was quick to note the intelligence of his new acquaintance, and un-

doubtedly Helen Grahame felt the attraction of the handsome Italian.

A stormy *galop*, and the cotillon was finished. Palmieri took Miss Grahame to her mother. As he escorted the ladies to their carriage, Mrs Grahame invited Palmieri to have tea with them that week at the Villa Trollope. Helen's smile seconded the invitation.

Oddo stood watching the carriage disappear in the darkness. A strange new sensation took him—a feeling of loneliness.

Was this girl only to be an *oiseau de passage* flitting across his life?

A familiar voice broke through his dream. It was Cavaliere Santacroce, who said—

“My congratulation to Donna Giulia.”



## CHAPTER V.

## THE ANTIQUARIAN.

No one knew exactly from what part of Tuscany Gaspero Bandini had dropped into Florence. Certainly it was a long time since his arrival; but if time and seclusion shrouded his rather mysterious past, some loose reports had escaped oblivion. It had been said that the Antiquarian was once the sexton of a rich provincial church, and had made his first lucre by stealing some priestly garments and precious chalices. An old man, who could remember him with his shaven chin and sexton's gown, said that he had one night entered the tomb of a noble patron of the church and found his fortune searching among carcasses and secular bones.

It was certain that the money of Gaspero Bandini was not clean, and no one wanted to have anything more to do with the man himself than was necessary. People in Florence avoided him as they would the hangman.

Aware of his unpopularity, Gaspero Bandini lived a retired life in his mysterious factory of Via Valfonda.

But if a noble family were near to ruin and it was likely that the family possessed some old relics, then was the time for the Antiquarian to steal forth for booty. So prompt was he to offer his ready money that he rarely went home empty-handed.

In two or three unscrupulous transactions he came near being brought to justice. In escaping its clutches he had formulated two capital aphorisms: one that a rascal must avoid being stingy with lawyers; the other that if law was obdurate in searching out the swindler, it was most necessary to have a victim to offer in his place. This established, more than one knave had been offered up in holocaust, and very often silent victims, or those who had been unable to show up the guilty one—the man in the dark who had so skilfully planned their ruin.

In his hand he held the fate of all who yielded to his blandishment. A young man, accused of purloining a Della Robbia tabernacle, protested that he had been induced to this deed by Bandini, who had tempted his hungry conscience. He confessed that he had stolen the tabernacle and the same night delivered it to Gaspero Bandini. In court Bandini the Antiquarian treated the accusation as absurd, denying all knowledge of the matter. Few believed the Antiquarian's testimony, but as no evidence of the real facts was vouchsafed, the unfortunate man was sent to prison, and the Della Robbia carried away and sold in Paris to a worthy confederate of Gaspero Bandini.

A student for whom the Antiquarian had paid some

gambling debts lodged a bullet in his brain because of being connected with the theft of a valuable cope from the church of Salice. Nothing could be gathered from an inconsistent letter written with a trembling hand by the victim. Bandini boldly held his ground, saying that he had paid the student's debts because of his being somewhat interested in the poor fellow—that he had even defrayed the funeral expenses. As usual, there was nothing whatever to warrant taking legal action against Bandini.

Later on the cope was bought by an English lord whom Bandini prudently advised not to show his purchase for a while. "I have brought it here safely," he told him, "but you know, since the prohibitive laws on exportation came in force, Italian authorities are so fussy, especially when it is a question of church articles; so one must use discretion."

The nobleman, a true collector of objects of virtue, who in any other transaction would have scorned to listen to such a proposal, thought that a touch of smuggling added flavour to an antique, just as a spicy Don Juanism adds considerably to love.

It was prudence to exaggeration. The Antiquarian had so cleverly disguised the cope that indeed it would have been a difficult matter to discover it.

It will be easily understood why a man like Bandini should have reverence for and fear of the law at one and the same time. Between law and virtue it would have seemed to him—if he had ever troubled himself to make the comparison—that the difference lay in this, that virtue could be hood-

winked with advantage. He, acquainted with every circumstance, had found more than one way by which to escape. He knew that foggy interpretation of nebulous laws, at the right moment clashing commas, opened out to him a capital labyrinth wherein blind justice was likely to lose her path.

The Bible would have been the most incongruous book to find in his bedroom. Not even the most consummate hypocrite could have connected the idea of prayer with such a man. On the table near his bed there were the three Italian Codes of Law—the Civil and the Commercial Law in white vellum, placed like guardian angels on each side of the Code of Penal Law, bound in fiery red. The malicious Rubelli asserted that the Penal Code was decked out like a cardinal, so that his master could not lose sight of it even at night.

In the drawer of the table there were numberless *Leggi Speciali*, all in some way connected with his business. There was the Law of Cardinal Pacca regulating the exportation of the objects of art from the former Temporal State. There were the laws of the Bourbons for the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, those of Tuscany, elaborated by Cosmo I. of the Medici, and the new project of prohibitive laws that the Italian Parliament had in consideration.

So shrewd a man, safe in his ability of breaking laws as he could take cover under their imperfection, would not challenge public opinion. Not that he feared to do so, but he considered it a waste of time. What matter to him if a poor student deprived his

family of his young life, if he had, at the same time, sealed with his blood a handsome transaction that the Antiquarian had concluded. Fine copes are scarce, and too well guarded in churches; while there are so many students, and indeed too many universities and noisy schools. He was a fool to be caught, and this earth with all its fine things was not made for fools; they ought to be satisfied with the other world. The soliloquy was closed with the reflection that "After all he went to the cemetery in a first-class hearse; whereas, if he had died in the ordinary way, he would have certainly taken his last drive in the hearse of the poor."

Cynical and perverse, as hardly the fantastic mind of the author of the 'Aventures de Rocambole' could have conceived, this devotee of law, with all its shifting and evasions, had been indifferent to any moral feeling or any tie of affection. In his wretched youth he had turned his mother out of doors because she abhorred the dissoluteness of his household. His sister, not born to live in such vile surroundings, had died in an insane asylum. Despite his past of shame and infamy his iron will had triumphed,

*Ecce homo,*

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE ANTIQUARIAN'S PENETRALIA.

THE morning after the Tosighi ball, when the servants were opening the windows of the Palace to let in the fresh air, and broom in hand picked up stray ribbons and miscellaneous objects here and there, Palmieri at his villa awakened suddenly and looking at the clock on the mantel began to soliloquise: "Well, I suppose I must go to see Gaspero Bandini." Then gazing vaguely into space he wondered what he would say, and what the Antiquarian might have to answer. From these *pros* and *cons* he was awakened in earnest by the clock striking eight.

At the same time, Bandini was giving the finishing touches to his toilet like an old beau.

Antonio, his faithful servitor, entered the room with a telegram.

"What is it?" snarled his master, opening it. Then after reading, "Go to the devil, you and all the Americans!"

Antonio did not grasp the significance of the invective, but he had learned to know, from the use or

absence of profanity, whether a message were agreeable or not to Bandini. Withdrawing he muttered—

“Master has got out of bed from the wrong side this morning.”

The Antiquarian left the room with the telegram in his hand. He was studying how he might invent an answer.

“A franc a lie,” he growled, thinking how costly were these devilish messages to send across the ocean. “This damned Yankee,” he reflected as he made his way to the factory, “has been waiting so long, let him wait a little longer.”

He entered the factory—a spacious room on the ground floor—and called loudly, “Achilles!”

The possessor of this heroic name was Achilles Stacci, a sculptor, who was usually employed in giving old patine to new marble in the great manufacture of antiques in Via Valfonda. He was also a sort of benevolent lightning-rod for the master's anger, which invariably fell on the perturbed head of Stacci.

“Where's Achilles?” demanded the master, as the workman appeared from the other side of the laboratory with a sponge in one hand and a bucket of water in the other.

Two workmen who were beating the top of a table with mallets—a device invented by Bandini in order to give blunt edges and due abuse to modern furniture—stopped their work and looked at poor Stacci, who in spite of his Homeric name could not be spared.

“Isn't that damned chimney finished yet?”

“Not yet, master.”

"You beast! Look here, this is a telegram from the American who bought the chimney and won't be put off any longer."

The workman knew that it was not his fault that the chimney was not finished. It was the American; he was responsible for having foolishly paid in advance the enormous price exacted by the Antiquarian.

"Now, understand, I am not going to lose a good client just because you are in love and going to marry some idiotic girl!"

Stacci was indeed about to be married, and at this remark he made a wry face, stretching his mouth toward his two over-sized ears, which stood upright like the handles of an Etruscan urn. For a moment he burned to defend holy matrimony and to break a lance for his girl, like an old paladin, by smashing with his heavy hand his master's face; but he subdued his feeling of physical power by calling to mind the moral strength of his master. Bending his head he looked into the bucket, at the surface of the water, where a piece of stone chipped from the chisel of a workman caused endless circles.

"Cheer up, imbecile," Bandini said ironically, "next time I'll put on a pair of gloves, so as to handle my workmen gently. They are growing sensitive."

"Well," said Achilles, "I have tried sulphate of iron on the chimney, but it is *pietra d'Istria*, not marble, and it is harder to make Istrian stone absorb the proper patine. What shall I do, master, unless you who are so skilled can suggest something? I am incapable of making the new patine look like old. It is such an unusual shade," he said, pointing to the



antique parts of the chimney-piece which stood mounted against the wall.

Very limited indeed were those genuine parts, only the half pillars and a piece of the frieze that had suggested the idea of the anaglyph.

Bandini looked at the chimney, which was patched like a harlequin's coat.

"Try nitrate of silver," he suggested.

"I've done so. Look at the bracket, master, it has the same defect; it is too red."

"Try guache."

"Well, if they are going to mason it to the wall it might be detected by the use of water."

"Then try benzine, asphalt, or hell if you wish, but let us get out of this."

The man began to look at the bucket again: Bandini spoke—

"Well, when the American bought it, it had a guache patine and many pieces of the ornaments were made of plaster—so he can't be difficult to please. But, of course, his expert, if he's unlucky enough to have one, might. So stain the other parts with chemicals as near to the colour as you can; then Rubelli, who knows how to fix the pigment, will come and do the harmonising. However, we can finish with colours and guache; it isn't meant for the open air and is for an American."

Bandini had fooled so many Americans, who had kept quiet, like seduced girls, on discovering that they had been duped. "Americans are a superior race," he used to say, "so unlike the French, who never stop whining after being cheated."

"But whatever you do, Achilles," he added, "mind one thing — reason. I know it is very hard for a workman to reason; but look here, you have put the patine on that chimney-piece just as you would spread butter on bread. For a chimney-piece there is the smoke which plays a great part. The columns are invariably darker on the inside face, and gradually a dark hue is left on the nearer part. You can produce this effect with an 'atomiser,' or better still with smoke. Rubelli can fix it afterwards, if any one can. It is always better to follow the way of nature and do it in a comparatively short space of time. But alas! we cannot always hasten." Then in better humour, "We must make it as antique as possible, so my American will place it in a room where it will look as awkward and out of place as Achilles Stacci in evening dress. They will polish until it will look brand-new, but of course that is their affair: we must sell the old wine with the dust on the bottle. Yet why on earth have these people such ideas? They might just as well buy modern bric-à-brac." And with this consideration he found himself amply justified.

Going back to the place where the men had finished beating the top of the large table, he examined it to see if the new parts had taken the ancient character of the few genuine pieces.

After rubbing with his hand the edges of the table to persuade himself that nothing could be detected in that way, he proceeded to examine the hidden parts that are generally neglected.

"Give it another coat of permanganate of potash,"

he commanded, "the wood is still too light a colour." Then recommending the head workmen to use hard brushes and flannel for finishing touches, he ended with the usual refrain, "Do not apply benzine and wax, or anything else to save elbow-grease." He knew that if many of the collectors had no eye, they often had a nose.

On his way out he stopped to examine a very highly ornamented chimney-piece which had been mounted for his approval.

"This is all right," he commented.

It was a work in the style of the fifteenth century. The upper part had been taken out of the entablature of a door at Viterbo, the consoles had come from Mugello, and were in the style of a century later, but the sapient chisel had chastened the lines, and from the reduced plan of the front caused the coat-of-arms of the Medicis to appear in *rilievo*. For some reason best known to himself, Gaspero Bandini had quartered the Medici coat-of-arms with the one of the Cappello family. The *candelabras*—pillars—which had been brought, from Como gave a lively hint of the art of Northern Italy.

The caustic Rubelli, when suggesting the motto for the frieze, had proposed *E pluribus unum*.

But the patchwork was not likely to be detected. "It is so easy to know things when you do know them," was one of the witticisms of the Antiquarian, which maxim certainly has a spice of practical truth.

Looking at the piece, a strange idea came into his head, and he could not keep from laughing. It was

this: What if the Biblical prophecy of Joshaphat's Valley should be applied to the antiques sold in these later times, when at the summons of the angel's trumpet each member should be bound to go where it formerly belonged? What a comical chaos! to see, for instance, the legs of the *quattrocento* table he sold to Count De Liouy in Paris cross the Channel in haste to meet the upper part in the collection of Mr Harris of London, bought before he, the Antiquarian, had the legs from a Roman bric-à-brac dealer.

What would the learned Professor Goertz say, who has scribbled so many profound volumes on old Italian furniture, just as fantastic as those of Viollet-le-Duc, the greatest novelist of the throng?

Ah, ah! But he did not know the true history as one Gaspero Bandini might write it!

Professor Goertz and he could remain at ease; the angel would never blow the trumpet, and his antique manufactory could grind out many more wonderful *trouvailles* for learned historians and wealthy fools.

"Look here," he said to himself, with a glance at the fine coat-of-arms on the chimney-piece, "very likely by the 'wise idea' of placing such a coat-of-arms on that chimney I have done a good stroke of business, and made a happy man too. *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.*" This phrase of Horace, learned from a canon when he was a sexton in the church, had always been fixed in his mind, and he flourished it at every possible occasion.

"Really," he thought, mentally translating the Latin quotation, "there is such a thing as combining

the useful with the agreeable. Now the learned Professor Matthews, of Boston, whom I intend making a happy man with this chimney-piece, has written a book on the love of Francesco de' Medici and Bianca Cappello, 'just out,' of course, like my chimney-piece. Well, I have already informed him of my *trouvaille*, and he has cabled back to ask me to wait until he comes before disposing of it. Now if my sculptor had not carved the *stemma* of the Cappello, Professor Matthews would not have taken any interest in it." And in his imagination he could see the learned professor sitting in his private library in Boston, explaining to some anæmic maidens that those very stones were the identical mute witnesses of the romantic love of a Tuscan grand duke for a Venetian adventuress, and he imagined how some of the fair listeners, neglecting to ask for details for fear of seeming like ladies of "another city," might be busy the day after consulting the encyclopædia to learn who was this Francesco de' Medici and Bianca Cappello whose flirtation had been consecrated before such an ornamental chimney.

"Well, he will be happy; so shall I, and so will everybody." Bandini, continuing his meditation, reflected that if genuine antiques were scarce in his collection, their new parts were certainly made of old wood with plenty of worms, and felt his conscience satisfied through that fact.

He made his way by the winding staircase to the room where Rubelli was working. While slowly ascending he debated this with himself: "There is

that clever Fainelli, with his Torquemada laws, his prohibition on exportation, his heavy tax, and here we are still playing our little game. They think they have checked us and fenced in Italy with an iron rule. When I send off the heroic statue of Apollo I'll cut it into three pieces, despatch it off in trunks, and put it together again with Styrian mastic on the other side of the Italian border." In the wish to justify himself he mused, "They make laws that violate the right; it is then my right to violate the law."

With this cavilling conclusion he reached the door of Rubelli's room. Opening noiselessly, as if to discover a mystery, he peeped into the room and found it empty.

"Rubelli, where are you?"

"Here," said a voice from the inside of a little closet with a glass door—"here in the dark-room, developing a photograph."

"Very well, take your time; there is no hurry. I can wait," and he seated himself in front of a sculptor's easel, where Rubelli had been working over the patine on the bust modelled by Oddo Palmieri.

He looked at the work with the peculiar satisfaction of a connoisseur, carefully scrutinising every part. Then he burst out with the exclamation, "By God! I knew it would turn out to be good; but it surpasses my expectation." With that he began to hum a tune in a voice as false as his surroundings.

The noise of water running from a faucet was heard

for a time. Rubelli appeared at the small glass door holding up a negative, looking at it against the light to ascertain the perfection of the work.

"Good morning, Rubelli," said the Antiquarian. Then, regarding the bust: "Look here, I tell you it is wonderfully good. At first I took it for a work of *quattrocento*, but to cheat old Bandini isn't so easy."

"Very few, or rather, no one, has your good eye," said Rubelli, who never lost a chance of flattering his master.

"To whom would you attribute such a work?" asked the Antiquarian.

"*Chi lo sa.*"

"Yes, that's the beauty of it. It will be an *incognito* of the *quattrocento*. It really brings to mind Mino a little in the sentiment, Rossellino in the peculiar gaze of the eye, and Settignano in the modelling. Yet it is not a *pasticcio*. Really, it is a new personality of the fifteenth century. I can tell you that connoisseurs will be at a great loss to find out the paternity—provided the artist is dead."

"But you know who sold the bust to you?"

Bandini had established a court etiquette with his employés, and after the manner of sovereigns, he liked to ask questions, but did not choose to be questioned. There was silence for a moment. The drops from the faucet in the dark-room could be heard with the regularity of a pendulum, as if counting the time the two took—the one to think of his own indiscretion, the other to dismiss his suspicion.

The Antiquarian broke the pause with another comment on the bust.

"It looks a little like Desiderio work, and yet a thorough connoisseur wouldn't think for a moment it was by Desiderio da Settignano."

"Let us call it *L'Amico di Sandro*, or rather *L'Amico di Desiderio*," suggested Rubelli, who was far more acquainted with books than his master. In order to make his remark more intelligible, he was bound to explain that Berenson—the author of a very genial book on art—had created a new artistic personality by closely studying Botticelli's works. The difference of lines under close analysis had revealed to Berenson that many works attributed to Sandro Botticelli were really by an unknown and forgotten artist. The keen-eyed American had christened the artistic personality, born of his analysis, *L'Amico di Sandro*. It was a discovery similar to the one of the planet Neptune, which was predicted before it made its appearance, foreseen by the deviation of the orbit of Uranus. If the astronomers, Leverrier and Galle, had had the imagination of an art-writer, the new planet Neptune might have been called "The Friend of Uranus."

"Friend of Sandro or not, I know there's money in that bust," said the Antiquarian brutally. He never liked to listen to the long flourishing explanation of Rubelli's romantic fancy, nor had he any esteem for art-chatterers, as he called them.

There was a knock at the door, and the ape-like face of Antonio appeared.



"What is it?"

Antonio entered with the precaution of one trying to step on bubbles and handed a card to his master, then braced himself for the storm. It came.

Bandini read the name on the card. "What the devil does that fellow want here?" he burst out.

"I don't know, master."

"You blundering fool, how many times have I warned you not to let anybody enter my house without knowing what they want? Look here, who is this Palmieri anyway? Can it be that ass who mixes himself up with antiques, and assumes the air of a connoisseur?"

Antonio stood motionless waiting for the clouds to pass. Bandini, ordering him out of the room, sent word to the stranger that he would receive him.

The Antiquarian before following him gave one more look at the bust, directing Rubelli to pass a slightly duller shade over the gold, which was yet a trifle too bright.

"Rubelli," he said, "I have made up my mind to have you take the statue of Apollo to Paris with the other things. You'll attend to the packing yourself. Put this bust in one of the large trunks."

"Damn your eyes," grumbled Rubelli after Bandini had departed, "if my poor mother wasn't ill, and you hadn't that document in your hands, I know exactly where I should land your stolen goods!"

## CHAPTER VII.

## A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

PALMIERI, being shown into the Yellow Room, was considering how exactly it answered to the description in his cousin's letter. As he waited he was fully aware that he had to deal with a thorough-paced scoundrel.

The Antiquarian entered the room noiselessly.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he curtly asked.

Palmieri explained the purpose of his visit.

"In conclusion, Mr Bandini, I should like to convince you that the affair has been represented to you in a mistaken light, and that it——"

"So you are the author of the bust," the Antiquarian interrupted, offering his visitor a chair. "Allow me to congratulate you." Then becoming more familiar and winning in his tone, but not betraying any emotion whatever in his lifeless countenance, "I am struck with admiration for your work; it is indeed a masterpiece. But as for returning the bust, and taking back the money—well—it is possible—a thing that might be considered—yes, it is possible

—certainly we'll come to some amicable understanding. Strange that I have the impression of having seen the bust before. I don't remember where,—but did you offer it to any dealer?"

"No," said Oddo, thoroughly disgusted with the idea. "You must be confounding it with some other work."

"Perhaps so; we see so many things in our business. But I am sure I've seen a photograph of it somewhere."

"Impossible. There are no photographs of it."

The Antiquarian very shrewdly managed to worm out all about the joke intended to be played on Centofanti, and how the bust had been sent to the Saccetti Palace the same day as he, Bandini, had bought it.

After the talk had run a while on indifferent subjects, Palmieri thought it was time to come to the point, so taking the bull by the horns he produced the two thousand francs.

"Not so fast," said Bandini; "you young folk are always on the gallop; we old people are slower."

This remark had rather the effect of a cold douche on Palmieri. He glanced at the grinning satyr which seemed to say, "I told you so!"

"But you said it was possible."

"Yes, I said possible,—but you see in our business one must think."

Palmieri was growing tired of the comedy.

"Perhaps I am to understand that you wish to profit by the affair. It is quite natural; and I am prepared to pay the so-called *buona uscita*."

Ignoring Palmieri's offer, the Antiquarian struck an attitude of pious vindication.

"The trouble is that the bust resembles a worthy person, a dear one now dead."

Palmieri could have laughed at the sorrow-stricken face the old hypocrite assumed for the occasion. It was too farcical: sorrow did not sit well upon such a countenance.

"Well, I can make a reproduction," declared Palmieri.

The Antiquarian shook his fist with fierce energy.

"Look here, you are so damned insistent I'll tell you the truth. I am not the man who found that the head resembled a deceased person; it was a customer. Your bust is sold. I hesitated to tell you, but, begging your pardon, you have forced me to it."

"Very well," said Palmieri, without losing his composure. "Then let us arrange it in this way: I will leave you a receipt in my name in the usual legal form, and you'll give me the one of my cousin."

"On that point you and I might differ!"

"But the bust is modern, as you know."

"But the receipt——" hinted the Antiquarian.

"It strikes me you're playing a bold game. I suppose my cousin will be used to shield your scheme."

Gaspero Bandini struck the table with his fist.

"When a document comes into my hand, be assured, sir, it never leaves it. Do you understand?"

"Better than you seem to imagine. We are at least together on this point—It is worse than useless to argue with a rascal."

"Sir, you are in my house."

Palmieri went to the door. The Antiquarian followed him. There was something sinister and threatening in the latter's look.

"Mr Palmieri," he whispered, "before you go, let me advise you to be aware of your cousin's real position."

After having shot this Parthian arrow he listened till he heard the dull heavy clank of the street door.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE WEB.

FROM the Antiquarian's Palmieri went directly to the Saccetti Palace to tell his cousin how Gaspero Bandini had categorically refused to give up the bust.

He found Alberto in his room humming a *romanza* to the accompaniment of the guitar. Count Saccetti perceived at once by his cousin's face that he was in for a lecture.

"Sit down, Oddo, and begin to find fault in a sort of Liebig compound. I'm trying to discover if the accompaniment to Tosti's *Malia* is easier in *Do* major or in *Sol*."

When Oddo furiously told of his fruitless errand, Alberto said in a light consoling tone—

"Never mind, Oddo. Bandini was under obligation to my father. He told me so, and if you don't annoy him with your sermons as you do me, I'm sure he won't be nasty. As for the bust, now if I were you, Oddo, I should take the same model and make another. Then send it to me and I'll show it to Centofanti, and we'll catch the old fool yet."

The cold proposal brought forth a strong remonstrance from his cousin.

Alberto listened patiently, assuming a pious martyred air, occasionally putting in, "What is the use now," or, "Don't cry over spilt milk." And when his cousin had gone he resumed his interrupted song, thrumming over his guitar, *Do me sol*, as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly he stopped tuning the instrument.

A question came to him—

Why did Bandini refuse to give up the bust when his cousin was willing to pay him for his trouble?

*Do me—sol—sol—sol*, went on the guitar.

"I believe it is Oddo, with his imperious air, who has ruined everything. Bandini is not the man to stand Oddo's threats."

*La—la—sol*.

"The idea of going straight to the point with a man who has built a house with such crooked corridors. No, Oddo was not the man to win the case."

He laid aside the guitar and stood thinking.

"Wouldn't it be funny if I should succeed? Then I'll begin to give lectures—anyway I'll try. I know how to handle Bandini."

Thus decided, he started off to make a call on the Antiquarian.

Ushered into the yellow room, he sank into an easy-chair. The stillness of the place gave him a stifling feeling—the place where Gaspero Bandini breathed so freely.

Presently Saccetti heard voices in the next room. There was a discussion over a document: he knew it was about the receipt.

When the Antiquarian appeared he received him with a smile.

"What a piece of luck! I was about to send for you, Count Saccetti. I have a project on hand. You must have divined my wish to see you."

"Les beaux esprits se rencontrent."

"But first tell me why you have come."

Saccetti, whose tongue seldom failed him, explained that he had come to see what arrangement could be made about the bust.

"I must say, Count Saccetti, that you have played a bad trick on your cousin." The Antiquarian gave his characteristic laugh. "Look here—this business seems to be rather complicated; but I feel disposed to make it easy for you with your peppery cousin. Yet you know I can't forget that I'm an old man, and he insulted me, and in my own house. Your cousin is a talented fellow, but he has a devil of a temper."

Saccetti attempted to defend Oddo, but the Antiquarian interrupted him.

"Never mind," he said; "don't trouble to excuse him. I know how to give and take. Much as I dislike your cousin, I don't wish him to be the loser through me. Here, these two thousand francs are for him; and tell him to keep his morals to himself. As for the bust, it is not in my power to give it back, and so I told him."



Alberto gathered up the bills, thinking how fortunate Oddo was, and what an ass he would be to refuse the money.

When he asked for the pen to sign the receipt, the Antiquarian replied—

“Oh no; that isn’t necessary. When I deal with a gentleman like Count Saccetti, you know——”

In his long practice with the nobility Bandini well knew how to launch this phrase.

The tribute had an effect on the weak mind of Saccetti; he laid aside the cynical mask with which, through certain snobbish feeling, he had covered a squeamish soul.

“Now that every difficulty has been removed,” Bandini continued, “let us talk about my project. What I am about to say may sound elaborate, but it is necessary to give some idea of the ambient in which I propose you should move. You’ll excuse me if I am brusque in explaining my idea. We plebeians who have been denied all etiquette cannot adopt the polished phraseology of your society; but all the same my intention is good, and knowing that I speak to an intelligent young man—every inch a gentleman—I am certain I shall be excused if I call *il pane pane*.”

Suddenly he broke out—

“Count Saccetti, have you ever thought that you are on the verge of ruin?”

The brusque question startled Saccetti; it had the force of a slap in the face. The deadly candour of the Antiquarian was nevertheless devoid of all offen-

sive tone. The young nobleman had, in truth, asked himself the question in nights of sleeplessness. The chill of eventual disaster had overtaken him when his last thousand francs had disappeared on the green cloth of the gaming-table; and "ruined" was the one word that rung itself in his ears like the trumpets of Judgment-day.

Not a movement of Saccetti's features escaped Bandini. Long practice had made the riddle of faces easy reading.

He reiterated solemnly—

"Count, have you ever thought of that?"

"Only too often. I was thinking to-day of going to my lawyer."

"Ah, there was your mistake. What can a lawyer do for you? He would only smile a professional smile, and tell you yours wasn't a hopeless case. But one day, becoming serious, he too would explain the true situation to you in all its terror. Confronted with such an emergency what would be your resort? A dainty jewelled steel with a pearl handle!"

"It is a solution," Count Saccetti interrupted bitterly.

"We plebeians, who since childhood have fought for existence, understand better the value of life, and do not resort lightly to such an act. It is only after all hope is gone we'll fly to that extreme. The scorpion does not kill itself with its own poison except when escape is impossible. But you are not yet in this condition; some pleasant occupation could save your position."

"But you know," said Saccetti, "in our class we talk of almost everything but do nothing. Times are changed: we are a race of the past that the new torrent of human energy sweeps before it. We are rooted up as by a hurricane. When misery is at the door of a nobleman only two things appear possible: to die or to disappear; to sink into one of the two unknowns. Which of these two ways I shall adopt I don't propose to bother about; let that as 'it may be.'"

In his *modus operandi* Gaspero Bandini had been thrown often in contact with ruined nobility. Expert in diagnosing the human heart, he had studied all its moral phases with the care of a physician investigating a disease. Proceeding from effect to cause, he had reached some definite conclusions.

He had seen ruined marquises retire to the country in idleness, because their dignity forbade them working. He had assisted a count to dispose of his last valuable objects before committing suicide. He had, indeed, seen many a member of illustrious family cry out against destiny. Notwithstanding, he had formulated an invariable rule, which through his obdurate pessimism did not admit of exception. The moral scruples of a ruined nobleman, he held, were ductile elements easily malleable under a clever hammer. One had only to avoid offending against a certain *triaca*—viz., a miscellaneous collection of uses, traditions, prejudices, and nonsense that noblemen call Honour. As for the rest, they were wax beneath the hand. In adversity these parasites of ease had no energy to face the ills of existence.

Balzac in his 'Père Goriot' has a curious dialogue on criminal temptation. "Would you commit a murder if by so doing you could become rich again?" asked a rascal of a poor nobleman. "No," says the latter. "But if the man were unknown to you?" repeated the tempter. "No, sir; it would be a crime." "But were he a Chinese mandarin, old, and bound to die?" "No," repeated the other, yet with less energy.

It was all the same to Bandini whether Alberto was ready or was not ready to kill a dozen of Chinese mandarins. He knew that he had his man, and that eventually he could mould him to his purpose.

"Suppose," he said, "that you were offered a position perfectly in keeping with your rank. Suppose that this offer would enable you to remain in your own sphere. What would you answer?"

"That I should be a great fool not to accept such a position, and be grateful for it. There's no hell like poverty; and I'd do anything to be able to pay my debts and preserve my dignity," said Count Saccetti, with the conscientiousness of ancient blood.

"Then trust me,—trust the friend of your father."

Insensibly the antipathy Alberto originally felt for the Antiquarian had worn off. He was surprised that the allusion made to Bandini's friendship with his father did not fill him with repulsion.

"Although I do not wish to wound your pride," the Antiquarian went on, "I'll use the convincing arguments of a business man. This is my project. We will make a sort of compact: I will furnish the cap-

ital with my ability and knowledge of business, while you are to furnish the prestige of the illustrious name that Providence has bestowed upon you. One thing, however, is most vital: you will have strictly to observe my instructions. Secrecy above all things should be preserved, as it is the most important principle of our business. Look here, Count; the first time you are tempted to be talkative everything will go to smash!"

"You may depend upon my secrecy," said Alberto. "But how are we to proceed?"

"First of all, I propose to refurnish your palace with antiques and objects of great value. Then when I have on hand a collector who has the illusion that Florentine families possess antiques in their houses, I'll send him to your palace. Of course, you'll have visitors with the craze for the so-called *trouvailles*; to these you will be ready to show objects with an air of great mystery. The lunatic will turn up who hopes for something in the garret of your palace—the garret, by the way, will be an excellent birth-place for old family portraits. And then you'll meet those who like to play the sharp one, counting on their cleverness to deceive. There is, besides, the peculiar kind of amateur who is very fond of exchanging one object for another. In that case it will be understood that you are disposed to part with your *chef-d'œuvre* only in case you can get in return a certain article owned by Gaspero Bandini. Let me say that you'll finish by being the most important *dramatis personæ* in an exhilarating comedy, such as

an outsider would never dream of. That's the farce which makes the trade, and finds its source, or *raison d'être*, in an inexhaustible vein of human imbecility.

"Should I offer an object, it has its price; should you, Count Saccetti, offer it, it has a handsomer price. The identical thing in a shop of Via dei Fossi will have considerably less value. But place it on one of those push-carts that go about the streets and it has no value at all.

"Believe me, that there is no other business so closely connected with sorcery as ours. The value of objects is a matter of chance, of jugglery. Here is the proof:—

"A few months ago I bought from Duke Sassineri of Rome a bronze statuette of Diana in the act of shooting an arrow. I paid three thousand five hundred liras for it. It was a rare work of the sixteenth century, of the Cellini school. Above all, it had a pleasing effect, which, you must learn, is the essential quality. When an amateur has once said of an object, 'It is not a pleasing subject,' he won't look at it again even if he's told that it is a Michael Angelo.

"Rubelli was about to go to London on business, when one day I learned from the 'New York Herald' that the millionaire Mr Haward Rice was buying bronzes for his fine collection. I told Rubelli to take the Diana statue with him and offer it to Haward Rice. I didn't know him from Adam, but I heard he had the bronze craze.

"'The price is ten thousand francs,' said I to

Rubelli, 'and if you are successful in the deal you'll get your five hundred.'

"Rubelli came back like a mad dog. 'They call him an intelligent man!' he howled. 'Bah! one should tell him to go back to Chicago to pack pork. If he had only looked at it!' Then Rubelli explained—it was the five hundred francs that were troubling him—that he had been admitted into the salon of the millionaire. While beginning to unpack the statuette, Mr Haward Rice had shot into the room like an aerolite, glanced at the statuette still half uncovered, and exclaimed—

"'Take it away; I don't buy such stuff.'

"'But, sir,' pleaded Rubelli, 'this object comes from a patrician family. You will never have a chance like this again; and for a song only—ten thousand francs.'

"'Get out! I know your tune,' the millionaire replied; and poor Rubelli was practically kicked out into the street.

"'Never mind, Rubelli,' said I; 'Mr Haward Rice looked at you instead of the bronze. There are some collectors like that.'

"Hardly two months had elapsed when one day Charles Tioval stepped in to see me. Tioval is what we in our trade call a go-between. He's a man of fine presence, keen-eyed, sharp as a razor, and no one knows better than he the *clivage* of millionaires. Everywhere popular, and passing as a connoisseur, he can swindle with tact, grace, and elegance.

"'Have you anything tasty in bronze?' he asked.

"Knowing Tioval's clients are accustomed to fancy prices, I opened the large case where I keep my best pieces.

"Tioval went like a flash for the statue of Diana. 'C'est amusant,' he said,—how often have I heard those words! 'How much?' he jerked out.

"'Only one hundred thousand francs,' said I.

"Tioval whistled a tune.

"'But for a Cellini?' I answered.

"'You indorse that statement in the receipt?'

"'Oh, the devil!' said I. 'Nowadays with the critics and art-writers, the esthetes and lunatics, it has become so fashionable to rebaptise a *chef-d'œuvre* every year that one can no longer safely indorse a statement with a legal document.'

"Tioval, while we were talking, was handling the statuette in the manner of a true amateur. I saw that he was determined to strike a bargain.

"'Tell me frankly, Tioval,' I said, 'how much do you want to make on this business?'

"'Thirty thousand francs,' he answered.

"'Very well, then, give me the usual bond and we'll call it a deal.'

"Fifteen days afterwards I received a cheque from Tioval and several English newspapers. The *colpo* had been accomplished. Rubelli read me some of the articles stating that the millionaire Haward Rice had acquired a rare bronze for his collection, a splendid statue of Diana in the act of drawing the bow, for which he had paid a hundred thousand liras.

"Now what do you think of that? The very



same bronze that Rubelli had offered for ten thousand."

"I think that you and Tioval are men of genius and your millionaire an idiot."

"Not so bad as that. He was only the personage designed as the victim of the comedy. Tioval, who was acquainted with his man, went to the house of Haward Rice and proposed the bronze, telling him that it belonged to a noble Roman family who wished to remain incognito. Then he went to see one of his colleagues, who also was acquainted with Rice, and together they arranged act number two of the comedy.

"The confederate of Tioval called on Haward Rice as if by chance. The statuette of Diana was, of course, on the millionaire's table for approval. Seeing it he exclaimed—

"'Great Scott! Do tell me how you were able to secure that bronze. Why, don't you know Prince Bearnstein is crazy to buy it, but the Duke of Sassineri of Rome was as hard as a rock about selling it.'

"'Is that so?' answered the millionaire, pretending indifference.

"'Do tell me what was the price?' Tioval's confederate asked.

"'I prefer not to say anything about that,' answered the millionaire. 'You know secrecy is sometimes a pledge in a bargain.'

"'Well, I know this much,' said the other, 'it is a mighty fine bronze,—a Cellini.'

"When Tioval went to the millionaire for his deci-

sion, Rice said with a lofty air, 'I'll keep your bronze, notwithstanding it is dear. Certainly you didn't pay that price to the Duke of Sassineri.'

"'Pray tell me how you discovered the name of the owner?'

"'My private police,' said Rice, laughing heartily.

"And so everybody was made happy. I raked in seven times more than I had planned. Tioval juggled thirty thousand francs into his pocket, and you know that amount doesn't grow on every bush, while his Excellency the Duke of Sassineri was glad enough to get a sixth of the sum to keep still. A golden silence really!

"But, after all, the happiest of us is the millionaire, who swears by Saint Patrick that his bronze is a Cellini,—a Diana drawing the bow—and a long bow at that." Bandini burst into a laugh. Then he added—

"Once the point was to have good objects; the collector came to us. Now it is a question of reading the daily papers so as to have exact information of a new collector's landing in Europe in order to be able to reach him the first. Then you will find your prey with his pocket full; you'll have him before his illusion is gone, or rather before a series of sad experiences teaches him wisdom."

Alberto, head in whirl, was dazzled by the dance of the millions. He could hardly wait to become one of the dramatic characters in such an amusing comedy.

Somebody knocked at the door; and Rubelli came to inform his master that the receipt for the bust could not be found.

"Never mind," said Saccetti. He had already forgot the purpose of his visit.

"The idea," said Bandini, "of associating a nobleman with the trade—to fetch the taste of toady clients— isn't an invention of mine. The Count de Riol de Lapin made a fortune in Paris by furnishing a pedigree to fatherless antiques. In London everybody knows, but nobody believes, that Lady Morfit of Belgravias has a protégée, a Chicago billionaire, and is amassing considerable sums in *pourboires*. I could quote hundreds, Count Saccetti, to show that you'll be in excellent company."

"But when you have refurnished my palace," said Saccetti, "how am I going to account before the gossiping Florentines for this sudden prosperity of mine?"

"I have already thought of that. You must go to Monte Carlo for a few days—but mind, not to gamble—then on to Paris. I'll manage to have a notice in the French papers about your good luck at roulette! To be believed you have only to deny the fact when you return to Florence.

"To be brief," concluded Bandini, "we shall enter into the first transaction under our compact. See here: I have an object, a silver *reliquario*, that we can sell with advantage if you indorse a statement of authenticity and ownership. Without wishing to offend you, here are three thousand liras, your share in the business. This is the receipt in blank that I want you to fill up."

Allured by the mirage of riches, Alberto hastily

penned his name on the paper without reading it; and in that moment Count Alberto Saccetti, the victim of imagination and humbug, signed his death-warrant.

The receipt stated that Gaspero Bandini had paid Count Saccetti six thousand liras for a reliquary formerly belonging to the chapel of his family. A careful description of the object followed.

When alone, the Antiquarian, while looking at the reliquary with its precious stones and fine niellos, said—

“Now, poor son of a theft, you have a legal father.”

“Gaspero—Gaspero,” a voice cried from the bottom of the hall, “are we never to go out, not even to Mass, without that old woman? We are getting tired of this gilded cage.”

“Damn those cackling women! nothing satisfies them.”

Was it possible that the whilom reprobate had still a household?

The voice came from a part of the house that Rubelli, designator of persons and things, had called the “Seraglio.”

“Nothing genuine here,” he used to say,—“not even the family.”

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE TWO COUSINS.

"WELL, to conclude," said Alberto Saccetti, slowly poking the fire, "your talent for sculpture, Oddo, is unquestionable, but of your diplomatic abilities we may be permitted to have our doubts."

"What do you mean?" questioned his cousin. "If you allude to my failure with Gaspero Bandini, I can tell you no one could succeed with a man like that."

With a mysterious mien Alberto puffed his cigarette, and, blowing the smoke into circles, watched them vanish in the air.

"On the field where Sparta was defeated, Athens picked up the laurel of victory," he declaimed pompously.

"How very grand!" and Palmieri threw his cigarette end into the fire with a gesture that betrayed his vexation. "I didn't know you were so fond of Greek references."

"Greek seems to irritate you. Perhaps you prefer Latin. I know you pride yourself in your motto, *Frangas non flectes*. Very fitting to your modesty, no

doubt. That reminds me, Oddo, I have been told that my coat-of-arms needs repairing. The black crosslet is still intact—a little blacker, perhaps—but the argent field has lost its silver. Now, as I have a sort of claim to yours—through my maternal ancestors—why not avail myself of my right? Of course you can keep your Palms, as I have no inclination for such an emblem of triumph, but I propose to use your motto reversed, ‘I bend but do not break.’”

“I fail to see what that has to do with the case. Yet since you ask me, I should say that my motto is good amongst honest men. But your soaring does not suit you, Alberto. Come down from the clouds and don’t talk any more of your high-flown nonsense.”

“I have been to see Bandini.”

“You’ve been to see Bandini?”

“Why not? You failed. Fortune doesn’t always favour the Palms. You went to him with fiery eyes and swelling with fine phrases. Bandini is too well acquainted with your kind; he didn’t feel disposed to discuss metaphysics, which to his thinking is as futile as attempting to sift vapour. You offered him battle on a field only too familiar to him. I know you met him with the dignity of a Roman senator, wrapped in your ideal toga, but notwithstanding you made a most realistic fiasco. You lost, and I won.”

“Won! Won what?”

“Well, you may thank Bandini for these two thousand francs he pays you for your bust. I can tell you the money has been burning in my pocket. I even avoided keeping my appointment with Scartabelli

for fear of the green table. Greek heroes these days are at a discount, but I can tell you I had my quarter of an hour of a Spartan."

With a jaunty air Alberto passed the envelope to his cousin, who with instinctive repulsion drew back and the money fell to the floor.

Seizing the tongs from the fireplace, Oddo picked up the envelope and placed it on the table.

"There!" he said, "take that dirt back to Bandini!"

"Good gracious! What pride! You look like the bust of Marco Palmieri in the Bargello. Now one sees why you go there so often: it is to study the expression of your Florentine ancestors."

"What is there behind all this acting? You cannot make me believe that Bandini would give a penny to anybody without compound interest. I don't know what he's told you, but I'm certain he's up to some dodge. A regular snake in the grass."

"Brr—*anguis in herba*—why make a mountain out of a mole-hill? You would transform our commonplace antiquarian into a villain of melodrama. Such people aren't encountered in real life. No, Oddo; this world is a gay comedy with a tragic ending. What's the use of crying out before the curtain drops?"

"You seem to be unusually oratorical to-day. Let us begin *ab ovo*. What reason did Gaspero Bandini allege for returning the two thousand francs?"

"Well, he held that I had played a bad trick on you and advised me to pay my debt."

"So you should again become his debtor. I am

certain that he asked you for the usual receipt. He's so fond of documents."

"Your dislike of the man has made you distrustful. The fact is, Oddo, you live too much alone. When one is by himself one is likely to become visionary and make companions of phantoms. Poor Don Quixote insisted on turning windmills into giants."

"I don't speak for myself alone; the man's reputation is known throughout Florence. If you heard what the other curio-dealers say about him you would hardly have the face to extol him."

"Well, then, let me tell you that Bandini refused outright to take a receipt for the money. When I called on him I found Signor Gaspero in an unusual good humour. He laughed so much, I was able to discover that his teeth were as false as his antiques. When he came to speak of you he was full of praise. Why, he even called you a genius and lauded your skill as a sculptor."

"I don't want to hear his praises."

"Well, if you think it more complimentary, he also stated that you had a devil of a temper, with no manners to speak of. He said that in your little discussion you both lost control of your tongue and had talked like two lunatics. 'As if I,' he said, 'Gaspero Bandini, could accuse the son of Florestano Saccetti.' Then he laughed. In sober fact, his laughing doesn't amuse me."

"But what about the receipt for the bust—has he given it you back?"

"Well, that's what I am coming to."



"Yes or no, Alberto. Have you the receipt?"

"Patience, my cross cousin. Let me tell you that I was just about to ask him for it when he pressed the electric button, remarking at the same time, 'I will give you back the receipt for the bust.' When Rubelli appeared he said, with some hesitation, that he could not find the document, which put Bandini in such rage that he told Rubelli he was getting tired of such disorderly administration."

"What a comedy," said Oddo with a shrug; "and you drank it all in?"

"Why not? Hadn't I already learned enough to convince me. While waiting in the yellow room for the Antiquarian I heard voices which seemed to be quarrelling. Without trying to listen I distinguished Bandini's voice. He was saying, 'You must find that receipt; I have promised to give it back.'"

"That was the prologue of the comedy."

"It is no use talking with you. I ask for the last time if you have considered this generous offer? Just think,—two thousand francs."

"Why should all this bombastic eloquence change my mind?"

"Well, then, let us change the subject. Can I do anything for you in Paris? I'm off to-night."

"I knew there was something at back of all your acting. What are you going to Paris for?"

"What for? *O bella!* To do what I like. I am not under age. Don't worry about me; if I need a first-class sermon I can go to Notre Dame."

"I believe you are going to Paris for Bandini. But

whatever you do, remember that you are a Saccetti, the last scion of an illustrious family. Remember that you have an obligation to pass on your name to posterity as blameless as you have inherited it."

When the door was closed on Oddo, Saccetti puffed the smoke of his cigarette with the relieved air of a bored man rid of a great nuisance.

"Isn't he tedious with his eternal duty?" he mused; "just as if I should forget that I am a Saccetti, the involved son of a ruined family,—yes, the very last remnant! I can understand that one might feel inclined to make a sacrifice for the sake of an ancestor, but so far as posterity is concerned, what has it done for me that I should bother about it?"

## CHAPTER X.

## A STROLL IN THE PICTURE-GALLERY.

A FEW steps from the Saccetti mansion, at the corner of the Strozzi Palace, before he had time to avoid the egregious old scandal-monger, Oddo met Cavaliere Santacroce face to face.

"Well, if this isn't a curious case of telepathy," the Cavaliere exclaimed. "I was thinking of you not a minute ago."

"Thinking of me?"

"Yes; perhaps it was because I saw a certain pretty lady driving through the Via Tornabuoni with the dandiest-looking young fellow——"

"But I don't see what that has to do with me." Palmieri tried hard to look indifferent, yet he could not help wondering who the dandy-looking young fellow was.

"Why, everything, so they say. Come, let us go into Giacosa's and have a glass of vermuth together, and a good chat."

"I can't, Santacroce; I have something else on hand."

Santacroce stopped, placed his monocle on his eye, and with the scrutinising gaze of a short-sighted person said—

“Oddo, don’t you know that you are a deuced good-looking fellow? Come, let us talk about the New World. When is one to hear the *fescennini*?”

“If by that you mean nuptial-song, I think I’ll listen to yours first.”

“But don’t you know that I was born a bachelor?”

“I know that you were born a booby.”

Finding that it was not going to be so easy to rid himself of Santacroce, Oddo said, “Come, I am going to the Uffizi. You can be telling me the news as we walk along; I know you are aching to talk about somebody.”

“You wish to hear some recent scandals? Per Bacco! Times have changed, and we are changed with them. Florence is getting to be as stupid and dull as a provincial town. Love affairs are so commonplace now. In my time poets used to write poetry that could be understood by everybody. Formerly *bonnes-fortunes* had a romantic smack, but now”—and Cavaliere Santacroce snapped his fingers in contempt—“now nothing but prose. Who ever dreams of a silk ladder, of a guitar serenade, of eloping on horseback—who? Look at our society of to-day. Poetry? They only read D’Annunzio. Some have courage enough to say that they don’t understand a word; but they read all the same. The favourite perfume of the century is benzine. The most romantic elopement—in a motor-car. I

am thankful that I was not born in these blessed times, because, to tell the truth, I cannot endure the smell of benzine, either in a motor-car or on kid gloves. I should like to tell you the latest—but keep it secret. You know how I detest gossip.”

“Go on with your story, Santacroce.”

“You know Marquis Cetrioli, the man who drives to the Cascine in that outlandish carriage, with the showy livery and a blonde, insignificant-looking wife. He sits in his carriage like a man that feels he ought to apologise for not being on the box.”

“They are from Leghorn, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and so is their title, bought and paid for by the father, who used to be a sardine importer. Lately the Marquis became jealous of young Mozzi, apparently without good cause. Noticing cigar ashes in his wife’s boudoir, he hired a porter to wait for young Mozzi, and when the right time came to give him a good lesson. One night he hid the porter in a corner of the vestibule. The rest is rather foggy: no one seems to have the precise details; but the epilogue is, that when the Marquis returned home he received the lesson intended for the supposed lover. Afterwards he learned that his wife had been smoking cigarettes for toothache.”

Oddo, leaving Santacroce, ascended the staircase of the Uffizi Gallery.

He passed through the long corridors, where, in all their triumph of gilded background, hung the paintings of Giotto’s school that he had seen and admired since a boy.

He looked at them with indifferent eye.

If the babbling of Santacroce had diverted his thoughts for the moment, he could not help going back to Alberto, and wondering what had taken him to Paris. There certainly was an understanding between Bandini and his cousin, or why should the Antiquarian offer to pay for the bust after he had refused to give it up?

"Well, after all," Palmieri concluded, "am I the guardian of Alberto? What do I care what he does?"

With an impatient shrug he made his way toward his favourite room, the Tuscan school.

Before Bronzino's painting, the portrait of an unknown young man, Oddo stopped. It was a countenance of ideal loveliness. What sadness there! Who was that courtly youth with an expression of such melancholy? A hidden sense of mystery was in the canvas. A lute was at the youth's side. Had he played the instrument in the Florentine *Maggiolate* before a court of maidens? Perhaps yes—and laid bare his soul in the chords he had drawn to make the heart of a loved one thrill. All forgotten now, even the name. No, not forgotten: the almost virginal art of Bronzino still told the tale with sublime eloquence!

Involuntarily the name of Helen rose in him as he thought—an idea that only an artist would have—how Bronzino might also have depicted her delicate features; those eyes with the glaucous hue and the deepness of still water.

"Helen—what a pretty name." In his vision he called her Helen for the first time.

That very morning he had tossed a coin to foretell if she would love him. The wrong side of the coin had come up, and he had cavilled over a chink of the ground; but he didn't try the experiment again.

Puerility?—may be. How many foolish things one does in private.

Was he in love, or was he under the spell of a fancy?—what was it? He had not seen Miss Grahame since the night of the Tosighi ball. He could hardly imagine how she would look outside the light-flooded ballroom, yet the white-robed figure had followed him from that night. Was he in love? Many a time he had imagined himself to be. Certainly this girl had conveyed to him a new train of thoughts,—a sentiment of respect and timidity that were hardly in keeping with his past life. His art studies in the Latin quarter had not tempted him to tread the path of a Parsifal.

Now with a touch of melancholy he regretted that his life had had nothing in common with the mythical hero. But how was he to tell that one day a girl could, with a glance, arouse an unknown sensation in his soul, and give his whole being a new view of life? How was he to tell, he who had always imagined ideal love food for fiction, and fiction food for people who liked to believe the world different from what it really is?

Should he not have met this girl when, almost an adolescent, he was about to plunge into the whirl of life?

Now all his experience, his clever fencing of words and well-turned compliments he had acquired in the flirtation of the past, all his private volume of *ars amandi*, had collapsed before the eyes of Helen Grahame.

The sound of feet shuffling along the floor came to Palmieri from the other room.

It was a Cook party entering, docile as a flock of sheep, and guided by the inevitable *cicerone*. The latter stopped in the middle of the room, while the party made a circle round him.

Not in a mood to listen to the art lesson the guide was about to impart, Palmieri left the room.

Slowly he wandered through the different salons of the Gallery, stopping here and there before some favourite canvas, and finally, emerging in the second aisle of the corridor, made his way to the Venetian School.

At that moment Helen Grahame, with her mother and the gentleman to which Santacroce had alluded, came out of the Sala della Niobe.

Even when arguing with the querulous Donna Giulia over the merits of American girls, Oddo had granted that their style in dress was a happy combination of Anglo-Saxon neatness and French inventive taste.

In Oddo's opinion, though, Helen Grahame stood higher than most of the gifted women of her race. The charm of her elegance was *personnel*—it belonged to her.

That morning Oddo's idea was strengthened on



seeing Miss Grahame for the first time in walking dress. There was nothing special in the simple gown, unless perhaps the perfect cut of a tailor-made dress showing the graceful lines of her slender figure; nothing striking in the silver fox that framed her pretty chin. Yet the grace that seemed to emanate from her person was not an attraction that could pass unnoticed.

The unexpected appearance of the girl dispelled the last shade of gloom that overspread Oddo's mind. As he approached the group he caught from Miss Grahame a smile that revived in memory his happiness of the night of the Tosinghi ball.

Greetings exchanged, Mrs Grahame introduced Palmieri to Mr Wade, their American companion, and a great friend of her husband.

Oddo saw at once that Mr Wade was not the dandy cavalier that Santacroce had described, but a middle-aged man, with the typical Anglo-Saxon face, frank and genial, in perfect keeping with the hearty handshake.

They walked along the corridor together.

The Museum was about to close. Mr Wade had expressed the wish to see his favourite room, the Tribuna. As they went on Oddo lingered behind with the girl.

After a few steps of dreary hesitation, he said—

"What have you been doing all this time, Miss Grahame?"

It was not a brilliant opening on his part: Oddo knew it, as he knew that his English had lost its

former fluency. How he envied Mr Wade, who was chatting with Mrs Grahame about whatever came into his head without bothering over words. Palmieri felt his own disadvantage, and began to fidget over singular and plural and grammar solecism at large.

"Nothing much," answered Miss Grahame. "Yesterday we all went sight-seeing; this morning mamma felt too tired to go out, so I spent the time in writing."

"Your travelling diary, I suppose."

"No, I am not an orthodox traveller. I write papa almost every day to tell him how much I enjoy myself."

This papa of Miss Grahame, popping out like jack-in-the-box, jarred on Palmieri. That she should have one was not unnatural; he had not given it a thought till now. The idea that a parent so far away could at any moment recall his daughter with a laconic wire, hung over his fate like a sword of Damocles.

"I presume Mr Grahame has been in Italy?" he asked.

"No; papa has never seen Italy. In his hasty trips to Europe he never comes farther than Paris. He says he's too busy to take long vacations."

The commonplace remark spurred Palmieri's sensitiveness. He was not a business man. How could he, with his questionable art studies, be compared with this busy Mr Grahame who hadn't the time for a voyage to Italy? There was a flavour of innuendo in Helen's words,—he felt there was something wanting in him to let him hope for her admiration.

"Americans are hard workers," he remarked.

"Don't you like to work?"

"Yes," answered Palmieri with self-reproaching accent, "but I am sorry to say that I am not a labouring man. My life seems a sort of waste; I think I'd like to be an American, busy from morning till night, to forget—my own inutility."

"Princess Tosinghi says you are interested in art, that you are always at work."

"One can hardly call that serious occupation. Nowadays every fool talks or writes on art, as every snob makes a study of fancy cravats. I have often thought I should like to have some solid business that would make of me a different kind of man."

"But don't you like politics? I am sure you would make a good representative of your city."

"Yes, I might go in for politics. Our Parliament is a sort of free kennel,—every stray dog can enter. No examinations, no diplomas are exacted on the threshold of Montecitorio. But, to tell the truth, I don't like politics."

"I daresay you wouldn't care to leave your art."

"I don't know about that. Don't be surprised, Miss Grahame, if some day you'll see me in America a serious business man,—a mine or railroad digger."

"Ah, Mr Palmieri, then perhaps you'd realise what a beautiful country you had left."

"Yet I don't believe," Palmieri said tentatively, "you could be persuaded to leave your country for this or any other."

"New York is so ugly."

"It can't be ugly, Miss Grahame, if it is your home; no place can be ugly where you are."

"Thank you."

The crystalline laugh that accompanied her words made Palmieri look sheepfaced, and feel he had struck a false note with his old-fashioned compliment.

Fortunately, just then Mr Wade turned round.

"Mr Palmieri," he said, "I am afraid we can't enter the Tribuna. I see the guardians are sending visitors out from some of the rooms."

"Let us go in by this way," suggested Palmieri. "We'll reach the Tribuna, and have time for a glimpse before the guardian gets there."

Passing through the French and Dutch section, they entered the Tribuna, where they had time to loiter a bit.

Mr Wade called the historical octagonal room the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Uffizi Gallery. To his mind it contained a few pieces which alone would be sufficient to immortalise the illustrious house of Medicis.

Palmieri thought that the American was above the average tourist in art training: he showed himself familiar with the fine works of the room. When he declared that he could not share Lady Wortley Montague's rapture over the Venus de' Medici, but preferred the strong recumbent figure of the *Arrotino*, Palmieri, in his rebellious feeling against official *chef-d'œuvres*, could have conferred on the American the baccalaureate.

On their leaving the Gallery, Palmieri was invited to accompany them.

As the carriage passed before Palazzo Vecchio a polished silk hat executed the ceremonious half-circle of an old-mannered bow. It was, as chance and Mrs Grundy would have it, the polite salute of Cavaliere Santacroce.

## CHAPTER XI.

## VILLA TROLLOPE.

PALMIERI was one of the first to enter the Salon of Villa Trollope the day on which he had been bidden to tea with the Grahames.

He was not surprised to find his cousin the Princess Tosinghi already there. It was her habit to anticipate the inevitable new introductions that attended the more crowded hours.

There is always something that reminds one of an Egyptian idol in the pose of a gentleman compelled to hold a cup of tea in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

Helen might have noticed the rather hieratic attitude of Palmieri with his tea-cup, for she asked him to take advantage of a little tea-table near by.

"Mr Palmieri," she said, "why have you left me to discover you were an author? The Princess was just telling us about your writing."

"That is a sin, and not easy to confess."

"Don't be too modest," the Princess said, "your work is excellent. I was so interested one night in

the manuscript you lent me that I only stopped when my eyes became tired."

"Could any one describe in more elegant way that one fell asleep over a book?" laughed Oddo. "I think myself that the work is an excellent narcotic for sleepless nights."

"Can one get it here in Florence?" asked Mrs Grahame.

"Oh, it has not appeared yet. It will not be published in Florence."

"Why not?"

"*Nemo est propheta in patria.* When I showed it to a literary friend, he said: 'A book on antiques denouncing forgery; why not laud the art of forgery? Imitations are so good that when I am shown an object of art with the remark, Don't you know this is a genuine antique? I invariably answer, Yes, because it is not good enough to be modern. I am of Sainte-Beuve's opinion: *Le dernier mot de l'art je le trouve dans la contrefaçon.*' So I sent the manuscript to Lenôtre, the French editor, who is going to publish it."

The tinkling of spurs, the noisy clashing of a sword heard at the door, preluded Lieutenant Guardafossi with martial fanfare.

When the warrior appeared he struck a classical pose, as if waiting for the photographer; his expression bore the air of the self-conscious male beauty, and his eyes twinkled a little with the symptom of a man projected into the lighted salon from the semi-obscurity of the hall. Surprised to find only a few

people, the young Guardafossi advanced with the special gait that sword-wearing gives to an officer even when deprived of the offensive weapon at his flank,—very much as an old prisoner drags his foot after he has been relieved from chain and ball. He officially kissed the hand of Mrs Grahame, and captured a seat near Helen with that remarkable familiarity many officers display when dealing with foreign young ladies.

Then he discovered Palmieri. He made a waving motion at him with his immaculate glove, and said with aristocratic carelessness—

“Hello, Palmieri, you here already?”

Had Guardafossi been capable of irony, sarcasm, or jealousy, this phrase might either have sounded like an insinuation, or, to say the least, have had the flavour of the famous *Comment, avant la Reine?* But no, the voice of the lieutenant was shallow and colourless, and the greeting limited to the pure grammatical sense. Conscious of the tremendous effect of his dress, the advantage of a well-cut uniform placing in relief his Antinous-like structure, he never dreamt for a moment that Oddo Palmieri in plain *borghese* might be a rival. He knew of Sandow's success, and hadn't a doubt about his own: his many conquests were there to prove it. So his court to Helen Grahame—and Lieutenant Guardafossi seldom talked to a woman under fifty without a wooing phraseology—was to be a trifling incident of his love affairs one little heart more to pass on the string.

As for Palmieri, he felt at sight of him an aching



jealousy. Even before, when he heard his clanking sword in the entrance, a voice said, "This is Guardafossi," and a lump of rage rose from the bottom of his soul. From personal vanity he was free enough, but when he saw the officer entering the salon of Villa Trollope, Oddo realised his own esthetic inferiority; was boyishly seized by a wish to dress in the showy uniform of the Genova Cavalleria to which he had formally belonged.

It was really the first time since leaving the army that he had thought of his epaulettes laid away on the shelf, of his uniform consigned to the oblivion of the garret of the Villa degli Olmi.

It was an understood thing that when Guardafossi was speaking there was no possible room for another voice to be heard. The gay lieutenant went on talking about his morning ride and the many visits he had made that day, after which he turned to the Princess.

"I hear, Princess Tosinchi," he said, "that you are going to reopen your Villa Montegalli. It must be a half-century since it was closed. I shouldn't be surprised to find the Sleeping Beauty there."

"It is true, Leopoldo has decided to reopen Montegalli when he comes back to Florence," the Princess replied. "The Villa has been closed quite thirty years,—in fact, ever since the night of the ball when the tragedy occurred."

"Thirty years!" Oddo commented. "Why, my dear cousin, you weren't born then. You'll probably find some dust at the Villa Montegalli."

"The Prince must have forgotten how the Villa looks," remarked Guardafossi.

"My husband was a mere boy at the time of that unfortunate ball, but he seems to remember every incident in connection with it. You know that it was his father, Vieri Tosinghi, who made the strange request that the Villa be closed for thirty years after his brother's death; and the time now has expired."

"Do the countrymen pretend still to see the ghost of Uncle Bostico Tosinghi?" Oddo asked.

"That's an old story. To listen to countrymen, every Tuscan villa has its private ghost."

"I should like to spite the ghost of Villa Montegalli," proclaimed Guardafossi, with the instinctive act of laying a hand on the hilt of his sword: he had forgotten that the terrible war instrument was peacefully resting with the ladies' parasols in a corner of the ante-room. "Princess, let me be the first to go to the Villa and despatch that ghost of yours."

"As ghosts must be slain at night, your shining blade, Lieutenant, might get rusty from the dew," smiled the Princess, as she got up to go.

Two English ladies, young and pretty, entered the room, and, to the great relief of Palmieri, one of them succeeded in attaching Guardafossi.

"How do you like our Italian officers?" Oddo inquired of Helen.

"They are certainly elegant," she answered enigmatically.

"Army officers are professional mashers. Guardafossi is a knave; he thinks that all the girls ought

to fall at his feet. Look at him now. A few minutes ago when he was talking to you and smiling like an idiot, I could have knocked him down."

"Mr Palmieri! I had no idea you had such a temper," she laughed, picturing Guardafossi sprawling on the floor of the Villa Trollope. "You are a dangerous man."

"A jealous one would be more exact."

"Jealous!" Helen looked serious, but only for a moment. "A jealous person? Let me see your eyes. Yes, I can detect a green circle, the very shade, I should say, of the traditional monster."

"But I have no right to be," said Oddo with blunt admission. Then he added, "You see that beautiful *Capodimonte* vase on the mantelpiece?"

"Yes, that was a present to mamma from Mr Wade."

"Well, it is a delicate piece. It would give me pain to see such a vase in the hand of a man incapable of distinguishing its beauty from—a stone-china tureen."

"Don't you think your theory is a trifling stretched?"

"Why?"

The tantalising expression of Helen's eyes put Oddo out of saddle. The next moment Mrs Grahame interrupted them, asking Palmieri if she could introduce a Mrs Chadwick, an American lady, who was anxious to meet an English-speaking Italian.

"I am so glad you can speak my language," was the brilliant remark with which Mrs Chadwick

opened fire; and there followed a long description of her voyage, starting from the gang-plank of New York. "We are from Kalamazoo, Michigan," she announced proudly.

Cups were passing round. Palmieri was curiously watching the new-comers, while listening in a distracted manner to Mrs Chadwick's run of experiences, placing here and there an emphatic "Yes."

Mrs Chadwick was one of those chatterers who become so interested in their own talk that they imagine they are having a most delightful conversation.

Palmieri could see Lieutenant Guardafossi, in his cockatoo pose, engaged in a lively tiff with a young lady who was criticising the Divine Comedy.

"Poor Dante," thought Oddo, at the idea of the poet's sufferings at the hands of Lieutenant Guardafossi.

Dante dismissed, the young lady inquired—

"Is it true that Italians roast canary-birds? I have been so disappointed not to hear more birds singing here in Italy."

"Why, you said yes," said Mrs Chadwick reproachfully; "but do you really mean it, signore?"

Palmieri awakened with a shiver and apologised for his misplaced "yes."

Mrs Chadwick had asked if he thought Americans were a strange people. He explained that he thought she had asked if they were a wonderful people.

"How do you like our city?" he inquired doggedly.

"Oh, I consider it a beautiful city," Mrs Chadwick answered, with the assured tone of a tourist who had graduated in judging cities. "Very fine, I should

say, yes ; but what room for progress ! No elevated railway, no pipes in the hotels to send down letters. I am greatly disappointed in the architecture ; the Pitti Palace is exceedingly plain to my mind. Why, you ought to see our Insane Asylum in Kalamazoo ! We arrived three days ago. It's our first trip over. Mr Chadwick is here to study up capitals and tabernacles."

"Poor Chadwick will risk getting a stiff neck in his exertion for knowledge," interposed Mr Wade, who had just arrived, and was on good terms with the lady. "Now, as a solicitous wife, you should advise him to study capitals and tabernacles one day, and next reverse the exercise by studying cellar windows and the bases of columns. By this variation he would maintain the balance in the position of his head, and thus avoid a sort of architectural stiff neck." Then turning to the young Italian, "Let me know when you are about to leave, Mr Palmieri, and if you don't mind, we'll take a drive together."

Oddo crossed the room to speak to Countess Talli, leaving Mrs Chadwick to pour forth to some other patient listeners her great disappointment at not finding mince-pie in Florence.

"Have you seen Alberto Saccetti lately ?" the Countess asked him.

"Yes, the last time I saw him he told me he was off to Paris."

"Then it is really true he has gone away ?"

"He has gone to Paris, and in good company too

asserted Cavaliere Santacroce, who always appeared just in the wrong time and place. "I feel pretty safe in saying that he took a lady with him; his servant at the station was carrying an enormous hat-box."

"You make a study of band-boxes? I was thinking that you looked as if you had just come out of one," said Oddo.

"Be careful what you say, or I'll tell Donna Giulia that you have taken to—tea-drinking."

"Don't tie your tongue for my sake, Santacroce; it would be too great a sacrifice," answered the other.

Oddo was anxious to see Miss Grahame and have a few more words with her before leaving,—rather a hopeless case, though, the rooms were fast filling with guests.

At the moment he was pinned in a corner where he could hear Guardafossi's voice again. Entering in a new phase of his versatile fatuity, the Lieutenant was endeavouring to convince a little daughter of free America of the beatitude of Monarchy.

"No, Lieutenant," she was saying, "kings and queens are looked upon as human beings nowadays. Believe me that in seventy-five years your kings and queens will only live in legends, and if one wishes to get an idea about them one will have to resort to card-playing."

"But not in Italy, my dear *miss*," answered Guardafossi, standing erect to give greater importance to his opinion. "The Army is for the King. Will an officer ever forget the oath, 'I swear to be

faithful to the King and to the country'? — the king above all. It is very plain."

"Very plain, but not logical," answered the young lady, her little turned-up nose taking a more impertinent attitude. "Not logical in spite of the compliment that Baedeker pays you: 'The Florentines have ever been noted for the vigour of their reasoning power.'"

The Lieutenant, who had been accustomed to cutting all Gordian knots with his sword, gave his moustache a vigorous twirl, and demanded—

"Why not?"

"Because the country comes before the King; so it would be logical to alter your oath, giving Italy the first place. Would you stand by and see the fall of your *patrie* were it the means of saving the King?"

"But——"

The Lieutenant moved along hopefully in search of a fresh conquest with a less skilled logician.

Just then Helen Grahame appeared at the door.

"Alone, Mr Palmieri?" she said; "let *mé* introduce you to——"

"Thank you, Miss Grahame, please don't trouble yourself; I am about to go."

"Already?"

"Mr Wade and I are going to take a drive. I wish you were coming."

"I'd like to, were I not on duty. Has Mr Wade said anything about to-morrow? We are going to storm the city bric-à-bracking. Perhaps you'll go

with us? Mr Wade wants your advice on a piece of old china—*not a Capodimonte!*”

Mr Wade and Palmieri took an open carriage. It was the hour that life begins in Florence: the city was gay, the streets bustling with foreigners.

Naturally the conversation fell on the Grahames. Wade told Palmieri that Mr Grahame was a well-known banker, formerly his partner. Grahame had a passion for collecting antiques, and enjoyed the credit of being a good connoisseur, but in fact the *deus ex machina* was his brother Paul, who was an artist, and now spent the greater part of his time buying for his brother. He concluded by saying that Grahame was an honest, self-made man, set so firm in his ideas he rarely changed his mind in anything.

They had reached the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. Mr Wade glanced up at the great arch with deprecating eye.

“To work so hard in order to give solid material the appearance of bristol-board,” he remarked. Then, as he gazed at the statue of Victor Emanuel: “It seems incredible that this piazza, now occupied by such a cheap effect of our paltry modern life, was one of the most artistic spots of Florence. I think your modern monuments are an eyesore, if you’ll excuse the frankness. I wish you knew Paul Grahame. He’s in Paris now, I suppose. I remember he told me how exasperated he felt when he came back to Florence, to find the old Piazza del Mercato cleaned out and replaced by cheap



French architecture. 'Just think,' said Paul, 'to find the heart of Florence, the cradle of ancient civilisation, under the hoof of an impossible courser, with Victor Emanuel astride.'"

"Florence of the present time," replied Palmieri, "is like the Florentines of to-day. They are infinitely worse than those Vandals who destroyed Italian cities, for they not only demolish, but, far worse, they reconstruct. We can mourn for a lost monument as for a dead friend, but Harlequin and Punchinello have no right to prattle over the grave."

It was getting late. Mr Wade offered to drive Palmieri back to his villa.

"Before I forget," he said, as the carriage was rolling towards Fiesole, "would you mind going with us to-morrow to look at a dish? I should like your advice before deciding to buy it. Helen tells me that you are a good connoisseur; in fact, she says you know everything."

"Oh, that really includes too much," Oddo said with a laugh. "I'll be glad, though, if I can be of any help to you."

Along the winding road that leads to San Domenico the sun was disappearing in a golden mist, and over the beautiful valley, parted by the Arno as by a shining blade, hung the bluish mystery of twilight. In the gathering shades lines and forms were growing indistinct, colours losing their brightness, and in the few lingering rays, stretching across the sky, little clouds were being transformed into mother-of-pearl.

## CHAPTER XII.

## BRIC-À-BRAC HUNTING.

TRUE to Helen Grahame's words, that day they stormed the city in pursuit of bric-à-brac.

As a rule, Oddo Palmieri was not fond of this favourite chase of tourists. When Mr Wade invited him to go he had wondered what sort of ancient art—as the American expressed it—was in store for them. But to spend an afternoon with Helen was worth the tedium of shopkeepers' eulogies over their cheap wares and their haggling over prices.

They visited many characteristic shops of the city, from that with the big showy window-case, to the little dingy modest shop where all kind of things are massed in artistic confusion,—queer little shops with their strange medley of good and bad mixed together in friendly association, where from some shady corner an object half-hidden—a bait for the unwary—peeps out with most enticing aspect, only to prove a delusion when rescued from the obscure chaos and brought into good light and reality.

Gay as a lark, Mr Wade was coming out of one of

these shops with a dish of *Deruta*, a great bargain of course, when a man accosted him, asking if he was interested in old ceramics.

"Sometimes," said Wade vaguely.

The man informed the foreigner about a beautiful piece of china, a Sèvres vase, unusual occasion, an object he had on trust from a patrician family that "through sad circumstances" was compelled to sell it.

Palmieri gave a glance at the short fat dealer. With his long hooked nose his Hebrew origin could not be questioned. As a Florentine, Palmieri knew only too well how old was the farce of the patrician family. Helen thought the man's look not very prepossessing, but Wade, already become rabid over the word Sèvres, declared that there could be no harm in going to see it. Major Bing hunted for Palissy in Russia; why couldn't he, Wade, hope for a Sèvres in Italy?

As they drove along a few doors below to the man's shop, Helen asked if she had better remain in the carriage.

"Perhaps it would be better," said Wade; "your furbelows might serve to increase the price of my Sèvres."

"He calls it *his* already. Look after him, Mr Palmieri; papa says Mr Wade is a rash buyer."

By the light of a candle they were led through several small rooms where, with great show of mystery, the shopkeeper took from a chest a vase in *bleu de Roi* with gilded ornaments, and medallions and portraits of Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette.

After he had turned the vase on every side before the candle, Palmieri proposed to the dealer to let them see it by daylight.

"Of course," the man answered, "good pieces never fear the light. I keep it here because it is a family secret."

He took the sacred relic to the front of the shop and cautiously drew down the window-curtain. He explained that the rare piece had been found by Napoleon at his Chateau de Compiègne. The Emperor had given it to his sister, Eliza Bacciocchi, then ruler of Tuscany; the Princess had presented it to Lucchesini, one of her favourite lieutenants of the Guard, and later the heirloom had passed to a Florentine family.

Wade tried to show indifference: the Bacciocchi family gave such local colour to the affair that he could hardly refrain from manifesting his joy before so fine an historical record.

The extoller finished with a string of "bellissimo's"; Palmieri examined the blue varnish and turned the vase over.

"Don't be afraid," said the dealer, scenting hostility; "every important piece like this has its mark."

"Mr Wade," said Palmieri with a smile, "I believe this is a German Sèvres."

"Do you mean to say it is modern?" asked the man indignantly.

"Of course; every bit of it."

"Modern, did you say, modern? Who are you that dare come here to run down my articles?"

Modern? I have proofs of its authenticity. Here's a letter from Pasquale Felice Bacciocchi, and indorsed by Lucchesini. Read it, if you don't believe me," and he handed Palmieri a well-creased paper.

"You certainly know the Sèvres mark?"

"Yes, I do; it is this"—the dealer pointed to the *sigla* at the bottom of the vase,—“a double *L*, two *L*'s interlaced.”

"Then what is that small *B* between the two *L*'s?"

"That is the initial of the artist who painted the portraits.”

"But you are mistaken," said Palmieri, "*B* is not the initial of the painter; it is the mark of the year in which the vase was made. In 1753, Sèvres began to mark the year with the letters of the alphabet, and when *Z* was reached in 1776 they repeated the alphabet, doubling the letter; it ran *AA*, *BB*, and so on. According to that your vase was baked and painted in 1754. Louis XVI. was born in that very year. Why didn't the artist paint him in his cradle? He was rather young to wear a white wig, to say nothing of Marie Antoinette, who wasn't even born.”

"Your reason, sir, is too scientific.”

"It may be; nevertheless your vase is a modern antique.”

"Modern! You say that because I'm a poor man, because my shop isn't big and showy. I'm sure if Gaspero Bandini should offer this very piece through one of his hired noblemen, to throw dust into the eyes, you wouldn't discuss one *B* or two *B*'s, but

pay a big price for it. He knows how to bleed his customers."

"What was he saying?" inquired Wade curiously, as they left the shop. "His face turned as green as a poisonous mushroom that had been stepped on."

"He didn't like my diagnosis," said Palmieri, thinking how small was the world of art-dealing secrets.

"From the time you spent you must have bought the whole shop," said Helen as they appeared. "Show me the Sèvres."

Wade good-humouredly told the story.

"Where shall we go next? Bric-à-brac hunting is becoming amusing. Helen's laugh was clear and her expression teasing as she said to Mr Wade, "You can thank Mr Palmieri for not having one Sèvres too many in your collection."

"That's so; but to tell the truth, I never gave much time to the study of ceramics. As for other things, I *do* think I've the touch of a collector."

"Where are we going now?" Helen asked again.

"Let's go to Pettinelli's," was Wade's proposal; "he always has fine things. I go there nearly every day to have a little art-chat with him."

"Pettinelli's? I like that shop too," said Helen. "One finds so many quaint things. I bought a fan there the other day, and mamma found such a pretty Chippendale tea-table. The dealer said they were antique. The fan is beautiful even if it be modern."

"He is considered reliable," said Palmieri.

Signor Pettinelli himself came to wait upon his customers with a smile and manner as polished as

his wares. The harassing concerns of the trade had rubbed off the expression of his face as use and tossing about does a coin. The very habit of dealing had stamped a pleasant mask that through long practice the man wore without knowing it.

His attractive shop, where fakirs of trade found no berth, was evident proof that the rare flower of honesty could be found in a field where fraud reaps a large harvest.

Signor Pettinelli's taste in trade was more in decorative art; old pieces of furniture and objects of art that could be acquired for less than a fortune set off to advantage his fine suite of rooms. If by chance he laid his hand on some rare piece, it was his habit only to show it to those he esteemed as possible buyers.

The rooms had the mixed character that such shops inevitably take. Not deprived of taste, the owner had arranged disparity of age, style, and character in less crude contrast than one might expect. A spinet of the *Louis seize* period occupied one corner of a room, where blended modestly the charm of a rosewood *marqueterie* with the rich display in gold of a *rocaille* looking-glass, a self-affirming piece which hung on the wall behind the instrument. Two chairs with delicate lyre-shaped backs filled the empty part of the artistic nook. Near the spinet a harp of the eighteenth century unfolded the broad volute of a gold-ornamented top, and a *viola d'amore* carelessly placed on a chair, completing the composition, gave a touch of life as if a concert of *musica da camera*

had just broken up. With harmonious progression,—judicious interruptions furnished by pieces of damask and embroidered stuffs lay here and there as if by chance,—the attention was conveyed to sober styles of an earlier period, and the frivolous century of candid wigs was forgotten. Sombre walnut chests and severely carved sideboards were made bright by majolica; the brusque-coloured ceramic of Urbino happily contrasted with the cold tendency of bluish Savona; modest, yet fine pieces of La Fratta and Montelupo favourably alternating with large platters of Sicilian factories, heavily ornamented with iridescent foliages and the brisk-looking incredible ships floating in the bottom of the dish on symmetrically undulated seas.

Florentine art, too, largely contributed to the charm of Pettinelli's rooms. There fragments of bas-reliefs, chimney-pieces, lavabos, spoke of an epoch when the hard *lavagnino* of the quarry of Fiesole lost all its stony appearance under the crafty chisel of artistic-souled workers of a Carthusian patience. One corner suggested a little chapel. Stalls of carved wood stood against the wall in choir line, while lustreless brass lamps hanging before a primitive-looking Madonna gave the spot a sanctuary aspect. Near by, Savonarola chairs, hard in lines as the ascetic monk of Ferrara was in morals, contrasted their simplicity with the rich *faldistoros* and fat damascoed priestly arm-chairs.

As Wade had defined it, the shop was an artistic chaos over which the soul of Pettinelli had passed, creating a delightful little world for amateurs.



Pettinelli, who had recognised Palmieri—one of the few Florentines interested in art—took particular pride in showing new objects that had arrived since Palmieri's last visit.

The party was strolling through the rooms when Pettinelli said—

“Mr Wade, come up to my private room; I have something new to show you there.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, come and see for yourself.”

“I hope it isn't one of those silent members of the patrician family that I am inclined to believe provides all Florence with heirlooms. Will the mine never give out, Pettinelli?”

“Never; Italy is an inexhaustible source of antiquities,” he replied with painful simplicity.

“If you excuse me a moment,” said Wade, “I am going up with Pettinelli to see a new object. He wants my opinion.”

“Be careful; don't indulge in any *bleu de Roi*,” Helen called after him as he was ascending the staircase. Then she turned to Palmieri, “You might have been of some use had you gone with them. I hope you'll see the treasure before he decides to buy. I wonder what it is?”

“Oh, one of Pettinelli's little mysteries.”

“Papa says Mr Wade is too impulsive, and he would never trust him to buy anything.”

Palmieri looked out of the window with a broad smile, thinking that Mr Wade had made the same remark about her father.

"Pettinelli," he answered, "doesn't care to have Italians give advice to his customers. He has an idea they either run down his objects or expect percentage. All the antiquarians have that idea."

"I know the length of Mr Wade's minutes when he's particularly interested in anything."

With delightful grace Helen seated herself on a splendid faldistoro, a bishop's chair, having elaborated gilded arms.

"You look quite like a queen," said Oddo admiringly.

"Thank you; perhaps it is because I'm obliged to sit so erect. I wonder if most thrones are as uncomfortable as this?"

She gave a little laugh, voluble as the skimming of a swallow, then throwing out her hand she fingered distractedly the cords of a guitar within her reach.

"What a sweet tone! I wish I knew how to play. I suppose every Italian plays the guitar."

"Where, pray, did you get that idea? I know of one at least who never indulged in thrumming. Pettinelli has a fine collection of old instruments; even that guitar is the work of a well-known Neapolitan, Gennaro Fabbricatore."

"Doesn't it seem sad when you think that the master who bestowed the precious voice to his instrument is buried with his secret? And yet a violin speaks for its creator. More than once, when hearing a great violinist play, I have felt as if the soul of the maker was vibrating inside the instrument. Have you ever wondered, Mr Palmieri, whether those old artists, who spared no time and pains to give a rare voice to their

creations, thought that by means of their work they would speak from their graves to people unborn?"

"Perhaps if they thought of it at all, it was that they thereby made their life more cheerful and their death less death-like."

"What a curious dish," she said, putting aside the guitar.

"Oh, you mean that one hung between the two Montelupo punchinellos; that is a marriage plate. The two figures seated together are betrothed lovers."

"What is she holding in her hand?"

"It looks like the head of a French poodle, but it is meant to be an inflamed heart."

"How very symbolic! But why should there be a third person?"

"That is the painter of the dish, or very likely a relative who wished to go down to posterity with the happy couple."

"After all, I think it is far more interesting than the pictures of those silly-looking couples one sees in photographic show-cases."

"I know of a rather prosaic turn of one of these dishes. Count Sorci of Lucca used his for macaroni till an antiquarian bought it almost for a fortune."

"That shows how easily poetry can be changed into prose. If ever I have need of one, Cantagalli shall paint the commemoration dish. The idea of posterity using it for beans and potatoes won't disturb my dream."

"Shall you stand holding a heart like that?"

"Why not? It certainly looks very original. We

have some old photographs at home that look just as ridiculous. One is of papa and mamma taken the day they were married. I wish you could see it; they are like a pair of turtle-doves. Papa says, though, that he never stood for that picture."

"Do you think you could spare a little place for me on the dish," said Oddo testingly—"if only the place of the artist?" he corrected.

"I dare say Uncle Paul will claim that place."

From the cheerful talking between Mr Wade and Pettinelli coming down the flight of stairs it was plain the two had come to some understanding.

"Here we are. I'm sorry if I kept you waiting," said Mr Wade.

"Have you concluded a bargain?" Helen asked.

"Yes, and pretty satisfactorily, too."

"And the colour?"

"Not *bleu de Roi*, Miss Tease! But what do you say to our taking a drive in the Cascine? I don't feel like visiting any more antique shops to-day. I'm bankrupt; Pettinelli's got all my money."

The carriage started off for the park, while the little Pettinelli, with complaisant smile, stood at the door, repeating—

"Oh no, *sair*, not all your money—not all, not all."

## CHAPTER XIII.

## IN THE YELLOW ROOM.

IN the Yellow Room where Gaspero Bandini, according to invariable rites, kept humble visitors waiting for hours, patiently sat Don Gaetano Tegoli, the *parroco* of a small village, Boscopini, perched on one of the Appenine mountains.

He was a fat, awkward fellow with a heavy neck. He had donned his best attire for the occasion, and his double chin was in continual conflict with his over-starched collar. His countrified features and entire rustical appearance plainly showed him to belong to that class of country priests with whom a visit to the city is a rare occurrence. His mild oxen eyes and good-natured expression spoke well for the simplicity of his soul. In fact, Don Gaetano had made his hasty studies in one of those priest-factories called seminaries, and as soon as he had hummed his first Mass was despatched to the forlorn village, where he had lived ever since.

Religious, somewhat superstitious, and greatly ignorant, but having an excellent heart, such was Don Gaetano Tegoli.

On entering the room, he stopped wonder-struck at sight of the rich furniture and elaborate hangings. A large mirror reproduced his grotesque figure and accentuated the incongruity, in such a place, of his worn-out frock, his heavy country shoes, and his cocked hat with its long uncombed shag of silk that reminded one of a mad cat.

"This might be a bishop's room," he thought.

The poor country priest felt out of place and too timid even to rest on one of those wonderful golden chairs. Seeing a wooden stool in a corner, he cautiously seated himself on this, nursing his hat on his knees with both hands fat as pin-cushions, and waited patiently the pleasure of the *Illustrissimo* Signor Gaspero Bandini.

He had met the Antiquarian once at Boscopini, where the latter had come to visit the church, and had persuaded the ignorant priest to exchange a fine majolica of Della Robbia for a new dress and veil the miserable Madonna standing on the altar so badly needed.

Bandini had been mean enough to procure the cheapest satin, trimmed with coarse imitation lace, for the new attire. The priest in his simplicity had considered the gift munificent, and had never regretted parting with the multi-coloured cracked earthenware. Indeed, he had been so impressed by the princely gift that he had ever since called Bandini "The *Illustrissimo*."

If the priest was at a loss to understand why he should be called to Florence, the employees of the

great manufactory were at no less a loss at seeing a priest in waiting. It was not customary for priests to pass the threshold of Via Valfonda: since he had dropped the frock, Gaspero Bandini owed them a grudge of long standing. Antonio, the servant, had at first refused to admit the reverend gentleman.

"Is master going to make a confession?" he asked himself.

Don Gaetano, as he sat there in the Yellow Room, wondered if the exchange of the Della Robbia for the garment of the Madonna might be in some way connected with the summons, and a chill passed through his spine. The poor man had lately heard at the village pharmacy that there were new laws about church belongings, and that a priest had been imprisoned for trading an old candlestick for a new one. He tried to drive away the thought by speculating on the subjects of the painting hanging on the wall.

When the Antiquarian entered he found the worn-out priest sound asleep. Shaking him gently with both hands, he exclaimed—

"My dear Don Gaetano, I am delighted to see you! Here, make yourself comfortable." And, so saying, he forced the priest, much against his inclination, into one of the rich arm-chairs.

"You are looking very well, Don Gaetano," he continued. "The good air and fat chickens of Boscopini—eh?"

Bandini put many inquiries as to everyday life at Boscopini, and also alluded to his gift to the church.

"It is still new, *Illustrissimo*. The sacred Madonna is adorned only for great occasions. Perpetua has made a washable dress for everyday wear. And you," said the priest, hoping to be relieved of suspense, "I hope you have no regrets about the exchange?"

"Not the least," answered the Antiquarian. "I have never had a single regret. The Madonna is always at my bedside: I shall never part with it."

This speech reassured the scrupulous priest, causing him to dismiss his fears.

"The last time I was at Boscopini," said the Antiquarian, "you pointed out to me a little chapel—a sort of sanctuary on a steep hill two or three miles above the village."

"Oh, the sanctuary of San Francesco."

"Yes, that's the one. Can you tell me if the little chapel is private property, or does it belong to our Government? I suppose it is within your parish?"

"Yes, it is," quickly replied the priest, hoping that perhaps the Antiquarian had found something in that forsaken place to be converted into needed tiles for the church of Boscopini. "The chapel is private property; but the owners must care very little about it, as it is almost a ruin. Once a-year, on San Francesco Day, I go there to say Mass; but I am obliged to carry everything for the service. There is absolutely nothing in the chapel, and the road is only fit for goats."

Don Gaetano's glance wandered about the room.



He felt it was his duty to pay some compliment, and so he remarked—

“How many riches Providence hath bestowed upon your worthy——”

Bored by these unctuous references, Bandini interrupted the priest by asking—

“And your parishioners—are they liberal?”

“The times are very bad, *Illustrissimo*,” was the answer. “Religion is no longer respected. The signori never come to Mass. Their thoughts no more rest with the poor: they think only of the Satanic device that proceeds without a horse, and which has become their god. I have been told that the money spent on one of those roaring, puffing contrivances would pay for half a dozen churches. What do they give to us? Not even a candle. There is only Marchesa Benni, who makes a donation of half a barrel of oil to keep the light burning before the Virgin. But, would you believe it? she has never seen the Blessed Virgin since she was in rags. If it were not for you, *Illustrissimo*, our sainted Madonna might go naked.”

Bandini, aware of the value of the old dress made of damask of the fourteenth century, had taken care to include it in the bargain.

“You are right, Don Gaetano,” said the Antiquarian, laughing inwardly at the priest’s description. “There is no more religion now; but the God-fearing times will return with the triumph of the Church. People are getting weary of the never-kept promises made by our socialists.”

"That's just it. The socialists are as bad as the heathen. They are trying to steal away the faith of our village. Two of those prayerless sinners come there every Sunday to preach and prate. It has come to my knowledge that these heretics defame the name of Jesus Christ by saying He, too, was a socialist. They are instilling their wickedness into the minds of the weak and giddy."

"What blasphemy!" exclaimed Bandini, donning his mask of religious hypocrisy—a long-neglected one, not worn since he was a sexton. Returning to the subject of his project, the Antiquarian added—

"Look here, Don Gaetano. We are not in the confessional, but I wish you to respect a secret just the same as if we were."

"Certainly, Illustrissimo."

"But first let me reimburse for your trip to Florence," and he handed him fifty francs.

"Oh no, sir,—no; I haven't the change with me," said the priest, thinking of the few francs in his waist-pocket.

"Then keep the rest to say a Mass for my soul."

"That is another thing," replied the priest, pocketing the money. "We cannot refuse an offering for the good of the church. I'll not only say a Mass for your spotless soul, but will remember your name in my prayers."

"This is what I wish to say to you. Years ago I made a vow to St Francis of Assisi, but am ashamed

to say I never carried into execution what I promised. Lately I have been reminded of this vow through a dream, and it is my intention to restore that little church. Even if it is in ruins, I'll do it."

"It is not a complete ruin," asserted the priest, delighted with the offer, but not a little sorry that the God-send had not fallen on the roof of his own church. "The walls are in less deplorable state than the door and windows, which are decayed and fast falling from their hinges. The owners of the chapel will be delighted. But—what a pity the church of Boscopini was not named San Francesco. It is in such bad condition that the rain comes through the roof."

It was not Don Gaetano Tegoli's intention to let his chagrin escape him in a sorrowful complaint, but it came all in one lump before he could attempt to control it.

"Never mind; when I go to Boscopini to visit the little sanctuary I'll give a look also at your church. How will that do?"

"Blessed be your sainted soul. You'll have your guerdon in Paradise."

"Thanks," answered Bandini, in no haste for such a climb. "But let me tell you, I shall insist upon one restriction—that is, no one must visit the chapel of San Francesco until the work is finished, nor must my name be mentioned to any one. You know my idea is that charity ought to be done in the way the Gospel directs: 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.'"

"Your secret shall be kept, Illustrissimo. There is no need of prohibition, for no one goes to the sanctuary,—not even the shepherds attempt to climb that barren track."

"Then it is arranged. I shall send an architect to Boscopini to-morrow to see what is to be done. Good afternoon."

"Arrivederla, Illustrissimo," the priest answered, dropping his hat in his effort to kiss the hand of the Antiquarian.

Bandini stooped to pick up the hat, while his caller kept repeating—

"God bless you as a shining example of Christian charity."

"Clodhopper!" Bandini exclaimed when the priest had taken himself off. "All this harangue over what might have been said in ten minutes!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

## RUBELLI'S LETTER.

BANDINI seated himself at his desk and re-read a letter dated from Paris he had received from Rubelli.

"Charles V. of Spain," wrote his aide-de-camp, "had a craze for having all his clocks keep time together to the minute. He never succeeded, as we shall never succeed in regulating the brain of Stacci with ours.

"The three trunks containing the different members of Apollo that left Via Valfonda reached Paris after various vicissitudes.

"I went to the Gare de Lyon to claim one of them. When the custom-house officer asked, 'What is in that trunk?' I answered unhesitatingly, according to the instructions of Stacci, 'The head of a Roman statue.' You can imagine my surprise and how they laughed when the trunk was opened to see the legs of Apollo.

"Thanks to Stacci, the statue of the god of poetry and music was without head for a week, and I came

near losing my own. But now the statue is ready to be sent to Berlin.

"It took three days to put Apollo on his feet again. Well filled with mastic—not exactly ambrosia, the favoured food of the gods,—the parts well-adjoined together, I consider it a noble work, and believe that the make-up will never be discovered by mortal man.

"By the way, in joining the pieces of the statue together, I noticed that Apollo, protector of Art, Music, and Locusts, had a hollow in the body; I presume it was to make the statue lighter. Just at the last moment, before putting the *torso* on the legs, I placed inside the empty cavity a number of the 'Assiette au Beurre,' which contained a good portrait of the German Emperor. Fancy! should posterity break the secret of the god by finding a Roman statue of Apollo in the Berlin Museum with the German Emperor for its entrails! All the spectacles in Germany would not serve the purpose of solving the problem as to Rome's being a colony of the Hoenzollern!"

("Can't that knave of Rubelli ever learn how to write a business letter?")

"Following your orders," the letter went on, "I have shown the bust of Simonetta Saccetti to Mr Tioval, who is on a short visit to Paris, and is stopping at the Hotel Ritz. Mr Tioval praised the work, but said decidedly he thought the sculptor was not Desiderio da Settignano. He was more inclined to think it a work of Rossellino. Of course he asked me the price, but I told him I didn't know it. I only

stated that the bust belonged to a Florentine family and was at your disposal. As for its being modern, I believe no such idea passed through his head. No wonder! I wish you could see it in the gorgeous light of this atelier. The *patine* and gilding of the ornaments are simply perfect; never has the *bolo* taken such highly finished old red hue under the gold leaf."

"If Tioval didn't discover the trick," commented the Antiquarian, "I am safe, for there is hardly a better eye."

It was part of Rubelli's business to be on the lookout for rich Americans arriving in Paris, and to discover if among them there were any who had the fever for antiques. This ascertained, another important thing was to find out if they were going to Italy, and, if possible, which of the different branches of art-collecting they were interested in,—a mission to perplex a Monsieur Locoq or a Pinkerton.

Yet Rubelli, with his shrewdness and patience, had managed so well as to be able to send the Antiquarian a long list with information. The list included collectors of bronzes, marbles, paintings, and even a collector of clocks.

"Mr John J. Bartlett, a well-known millionaire," went on Rubelli, "one of the magnates of Wall Street, is now at the Palace Hotel. I hear through a dealer of the Rue Saint Georges that this Bartlett has just built a splendid mansion in New York. All decoration, from pillar to post, has been imported. What a pity we never knew of him.

"That evening I dined at the Palace Hotel, and secured a table quite near that of Mr John J. Bartlett, who was with a friend, a Mr Mitchell. I have found out that he is Bartlett's chief adviser. I could pick up nothing of importance from what I heard of their conversation beyond the fact that Bartlett was expecting a party of friends to dine with him the following evening. So I made up my mind to join the select assembly of millionaires where words were flowing as freely as champagne.

"The next evening, while posing as usual for a literary man, I sat near the *compagnia* to hear and take notes. Some of these notes you will find of great importance.

"One gentleman—I couldn't catch his name—had just arrived from London, where he had been attending a picture sale at Christie's. He spoke about the sale of Dresden china, saying enormous prices had been fetched.

"‘Well, Bartlett,’ he said, ‘I hope you will be successful in finding a bronze door for your entrance better than the Florence Baptistery one which Michelangelo, you know, thought worthy of being called the gate of Paradise.’

"‘I suppose it depends upon my friend Mitchell,’ answered the millionaire, ‘that’s in *his* line of business. He says he’ll be able to find one far superior to the Vanderbilt gate bought from the Prince Demidoff Villa near Florence.’

"‘*Cave falsum facere*—beware of imitation, Mitchell. Italy is glutted with artistic frauds.’



"‘You can’t fool Mitchell, he has the safest eye in New York,’ answered Bartlett, ready to swear in *verba magistri*.

"‘Well,’ Mitchell returned, ‘I am like Baron Rothschild when he bought the Tanagra statuettes. To be sure of the authenticity, he insisted upon seeing them excavated from mother earth. So with the door in question,—it must be on the original hinges. I don’t go in for legerdemain.’

"‘To make a long story short,’ concluded Rubelli’s letter, ‘why not provide a door and four hinges to gratify Mr Bartlett and the taste of his adviser?’

"‘You will remember that near Boscopini, the village where I went to pack the Robbia, stands a little chapel called San Francesco. I believe that the bronze door you had cast in Calcinaia and mounted in that old oak frame would just fit the hinges. I thought of it when I went up there; it is an excellent imitation of the Romanesque style of the same epoch as the Chapel of San Francesco.

"‘Bear in mind that the priest of Boscopini is an accommodating old fossil.’

"‘Rubelli is becoming diplomatic,’ chuckled the Antiquarian. ‘Of course it is the hope of a good reward.’

To open mind, sense, and brain—nothing like the golden key.

## CHAPTER XV.

## THE MONASTERY OF CERTOSA.

MRS and Miss Grahame were going to Rome. Mr Wade had decided to leave for Paris and sail, after a brief sojourn in the French capital, by the *Transatlantic* for New York.

Before packing his Florentine acquisitions, Mr Wade asked Palmieri to step in and give them a look. That same day Wade had arranged with Mrs Grahame a good-bye drive to Certosa, and had asked the young Italian to come in early to give his impression on the things, then they would all drive out to the monastery.

Among the six or seven objects the American had picked up in Florence were a fine polychromatic stucco and a charming painting, the subject of a Boccaccio's tale, evidently the front panel of a wedding chest,—the two pieces Wade had bought that day they were at Pettinelli's shop.

Even in the garden of antiques, roses do not grow without thorns. Palmieri gave a rather suspicious look at a bronze and told Wade his doubts.

"Why do you think it might be modern?" asked

Wade, giving a sorrowful glance to the illegitimate member of his group, a bronze Madonna in bas-relief. "Bronze isn't my strongest point," he added; "my speciality is painting; yet I see nothing bad about that bronze."

"An expert would probably tell you that the sharp edges are a trifle too shiny, and the hue of the *patine* dull and monotonous. It looks to me very much like a Gaspero Bandini bronze. The *patine à la chocolat*, as the antiquarians call the particular hue Bandini gives to his bronzes, is quite known in Florence."

"You mean that man who lives in Via Valfonda? Aren't you mistaken? I bought this Madonna in Prato. A man came here to the Pension to tell me that an old gentleman of good family, of course he must have been one of the patricians, in want of money, had decided to sell his bronze."

"Was the man that came to you a dark thin fellow with a slight squint?"

"Exactly."

"His name is Ettore Rubelli."

"That was not the name on his card."

"He was Bandini's man all the same. Cards count for very little; with a couple of francs you can print any name you wish, and a half-franc extra will give one a choice of crowns. How did he know your name?"

"He said he had it from one of the clerks in Pettinelli's, and he came directly to avoid any interference by antiquarians."

"And you went to Prato with him?"

"Yes, and we drove from the station at Prato to a villa, where we were met by a gentleman who showed me the Madonna hanging in his bedroom. I remember seeing a lot of flowers and a lighted candle. It was pathetic; the gentleman looked so sorry to part with the bronze, that had it not been for my eager passion as a collector in front of such a fine piece, I should have thrown up the job. Why, I felt as if I were the chief mourner at a funeral. That old man actually kissed the Madonna before parting with it.

"Evidently his gratitude for an accomplished miracle," said Oddo, laughing.

"Let me tell you that I should pay double the price I paid for that *thing*, the dearest object I have bought in Florence, if I could bring this Bandini and his gang into a court of justice. As for the *nobleman*, I should like to give him a good thrashing. Fancy, good money for counterfeit rot."

And for a moment Wade felt like kicking the boot of Italy out of the map of Europe.

An hour later the party was driving towards Certosa.

A shower had laid the dust on the road, and the sun was bright, the air clear and transparent. When the monastery appeared in view, its imposing mass towering like a castle on the green hill of Montauto, Mr. Wade exclaimed—

"Those monks knew how to choose the right kind of place to build. Have you ever seen a lovelier spot than that?"

Ascending the winding road the carriage stopped before the steep way that leads to the convent. On the top of the road, between high walls, is a great arch framing a prison-like gate—the entrance of the monastery.

A monk in white garb, with officious manner that seemed inherited from times gone by, offered his service as guide through the convent.

The eloquence of a historical building often arises from its muteness; the life of a nation dead and gone is generally characterised by the monuments it leaves behind. It is from these relics that we can judge of the different taste of former generations, and the degree of civilisation of past races and the style they led. These memorials are often truer indication than history itself.

The passer-by can easily distinguish the earlier period of Florentine architecture, that restless time when the Republic was always agitated by civil contests. Open hostility then marked the everyday life, and the warlike character of the time is indelibly stamped upon the dusky records of early Florence. The huge massive towers and bulwarks were the principal, if not the only, feature of old Florentine architecture.

In its appearance the Certosa shows a strange result of the effects of peace and war, of piety and ferocity of the buried past, and is an eloquent proof of the struggle toward civilisation.

There the monastery has stood for centuries. At the foot of the hill runs the winding road leading to Rome,

and from its level stretch generation after generation has beheld the sightly pile above.

On one side of the building lies the monastery, with its desolated corridors, where voices and sounds are lost in ghostly echoes, and its deserted cloisters, stiller than the graves of the monks within them. On the other side, encircled by the convent walls, stands the castle of the Acciaiuoli. A ruin—but what a ruin! Erected by the great Siniscalco Niccolo Acciaiuoli in the fourteenth century, it still appeals to the imagination, with its Cyclopean walls and crumbling buttress.

On the hill of Montebuoni, facing Certosa, once stood another castle, that of the Buondelmonte, a powerful family that from this stronghold kept in check the Florentine Republic, and extorted heavy tolls from the passer-by, ransomed ambassadors, and captured a cardinal.

When the Acciaiuoli castle was built, the one of Buondelmonte was already a heap of ruins, the Florentine having besieged and captured it, and compelled the fierce Buondelmonte to live in the city. There the latter became prominent figures in one of the most obdurate civil contests that Florence ever witnessed. One of the branches of the family changed the name to that of Buonaparte. The love of war must have been in the blood of the Buondelmonte, as one of their descendants sealed his fate in the carnage of Waterloo.

Monastic tranquillity succeeded. A legion of unfortunates found shelter in the Convent of Certosa, consoled by the ascetic life and by dreams of heaven.

Now the great monastery is no more than a tomb of the past, and only a few monks, guardians of the place, are to be met there.

Helen had been there several times, but it was Mrs Grahame's first visit. The monk was leading the way to the "Chapter Hall." Helen had seated herself on the stone parapet of the Chiostro Grande and Oddo remained with her. She was leaning against one of the stone pillars of the great arcade that girdle the emerald green plot of the cloister.

A passing monk, his head humbly bent, took off his calotte to the strangers, and disappeared on his way through the arcades.

"What a queer life these monks must lead," remarked Oddo as the white-robed figure vanished. "I wonder what they do with themselves all the day long,—they can't be praying from morning till night."

"Perhaps they meditate; there must be an irresistible charm about this silence. Who hasn't felt the poetry of silence and solitude?"

"Sometimes that's true. But to enter, full of life, only to die in this tomb, buried alive—to care for no one and probably not to be cared for,—it must be rather dreary."

"That depends upon circumstances, doesn't it? A convent is often a harbour of peace for shipwrecked life. When I was at the Sacred Heart I used to think that should sorrow ever encroach my path of life I would like to be a nun."

"How can you say such a thing, Miss Grahame?"

Life cannot help smiling on *you*. You have everything to make one happy."

"And so you have, Mr Palmieri. I meant that—happiness in life hangs on such a slender thread. Did you ever feel in your happiest moments that—well, that even from far away there might come a great change? Sometimes in a bright sky one can see a little cloud, hardly perceptible. When I think that the little spot might grow big and dark, then I see my good nuns of the Sacred Heart, their peaceful smile, and their blessed contented life."

"I can't agree with you, Miss Grahame; I don't understand such compromise between happiness and misfortune. As for myself, if the unturned leaves in my book of life open to a blank page, a certain page where I have in fancy put down all my hopes, the page of pages,—why should I care to live? I see no purpose in only prolonging suffering."

"Aren't you a pagan! What do you know of sorrow any more than I? Mr Palmieri," she said after a short pause, as if about to say something very interesting, "we are talking nonsense. It must be this historical place that has suggested to us—fictitious characters."

Helen stooped to pick up a blue wild-flower from the green plot. Oddo pensively watched a long line of ants that were tracing a dark path at his feet.

"What are you thinking about?" Helen asked after a time.

"Do you care to know my thoughts? To-morrow will be a lonely day. My friends are all leaving.



You and Mrs Grahame go to Rome, and Mr Wade to Paris."

"But we are coming back. Do you know, Mr Palmieri, that Princess Tosinghi has invited us to the re-opening of her villa? Won't it be splendid?"

"Yes, to see you again. Cousin Isidora told me of her invitation; but from now till that time, think of it—it's a century. Then you are coming back only on your way to that dismal *Kaiser Wilhelm* that will toss you over the ocean."

"I suppose distance loses a good deal of its significance with Americans. The world doesn't seem as large as it is described; since we have been in Europe we have met several times acquaintances we made coming over."

"Oh, well, perhaps my ideas are provincial; but nothing makes me feel so low-spirited as the going away of a friend. I feel I may never see that friend again. You will think me strange, Miss Grahame, when I tell you the curious sentiment I have even with a stranger. You saw that monk pass here? All I know of him is that he exists, yet if I knew he had gone for ever, that I should never see him again, it isn't at all likely I should cry, but it would make me feel sorry."

"That's too much, Mr Palmieri; you have short-sighted views. If I were you I would run after the monk and ask his name."

"I see you love to torment me," said Oddo in some vexation.

Neither spoke. Again Oddo gazed silently on the

line of busy ants, while Helen slowly and abstractedly pulled off the leaves of her flower.

When the last blue petal had wavered in the air to light on a plant like a butterfly, Oddo asked—

“Did your wish come right?”

“I wasn’t wishing anything—particular. You can’t imagine what I was thinking.”

“It would be difficult to divine the wish of one that has no wish.”

“But I told you that I wasn’t *wishing*. I was looking at that bas-relief and wondering——”

She pointed to a marble slab of an old tomb bearing in relief a man in armour urging his steed to the course, and thrusting forward his sword towards the unknown. The motto on his shield read, *Osa e sará*.

“I wondered what could have induced that armed knight to take such a motto.”

“‘Dare and it shall be.’ It is strange,” said Oddo, translating the motto. “I like it. Will you give that motto to me?”

“With pleasure. *C’est facile*.” She took her notebook, tore out a leaf, and wrote, *Osa e sará*. Handing it to Oddo she said, “Here’s your *investitura*. Now you are knighted; when you go to the Cascine on your bay mare, unless you have a shield, I advise you to have the motto embroidered on the band of your silk hat.”

“Wouldn’t I score a success!”

“*Pas banale*. I believe it would require more courage than the old tournament and tilting trials.”

“I say, Miss Grahame, if really there’s no other way to win your grace I’ll do it to-morrow.”

"The idea!"

Mr Wade and Mrs Grahame appeared from the other end of the portico, accompanied by the monk. The convent bells merrily broke the silence, filling all the valley with their melody.

"Let us join our party and visit the church together," Helen suggested.

The church of Certosa, although imposing, does not give one the idea of a place of worship. It is true that there is all that marvellous art and skill can produce, but not what poetry, sentiment, and mysticism can suggest. The Christian's soul is not thrilled there, nor filled with the peace of a sacred place as under the sombre arcades of the Duomo, the melancholy aisles of Santa Croce, or the dimly-lighted interior of Santo Spirito.

Looking down in the vaults where the founders of Certosa are buried, moving among the effigies of the Acciaiuoli, one might fancy he saw the green figure of Hamlet's ghost.

The ancient knights buckled in their armour are sculptured in a line on marble slabs, their arms crossed upon their breasts, and a serene expression, as of those who have met their reward, upon their faces. The scythe of death proved of keener edge than the weapons carved at their sides.

Oddo made some interesting remark on the *naïveté* of one of the bas-reliefs and the great merit of the art of that time.

"There," cried Helen, "you have betrayed yourself; you are a sculptor."

Oddo looked at her. "Oh, that incorrigible old gossip, Santacroce!" he exclaimed. "He was in your box last evening; I saw him when I was visiting my cousin, Tosinghi."

"Yes, he told me that you had great talent."

"I suppose I ought to feel flattered, but considering that he has never seen any of my work, I wonder how he can judge."

"Mr Palmieri talks like an artist," interposed Mr Wade; "and I'm sure he is a good sculptor."

"I hope you'll not see my work; I am anxious now to keep my fine reputation," laughed Oddo.

"This way out, please," said the monk, ascending the staircase.

On the way back to Florence they saw the moon just rising from the horizon, a crescent of silver.

"New moon," said Helen, "three bows and a wish."

"Don't ask such folly of me," said Wade; "I have an old grudge against the moon. I was quite a lad when I made my first bow to the moon, and an icicle fell from the roof above and smashed my maiden stove-pipe."

That night Oddo Palmieri, coming out of the Villa Trollope, stopped in the middle of the Piazza Indipendenza and, gazing at the shiny little scythe on the sky, wondered what Helen's wish could have been.

"That's right," said Cavaliere Santacroce, at Oddo's back; "in love, each one his own way. Alberto plays

'love and roulette' at Monte Carlo; you, the poetical Oddo, prowl near the house of the lady—may I say of your choice?—trying to learn from the moon what you will do when the ladies are gone. Decidedly Voltaire is right: *L'Amour c'est un canevas donné par la nature et brodé par l'imagination.*"

## CHAPTER XVI.

## VILLA MONTEGALLI.

MONTEGALLI, the so long abandoned Villa of the Tosinghi, was built on the top of a hill bordering the Chianti. A large garden, occupying the whole flat of the summit, set the mansion in an emerald ring. It was one of those characteristic Italian gardens, stamped with sixteenth-century grandeur of life, where geometrically-cut alleys bordered by box played such great part; where statues of disgraced gods of mythology seemed sadly to meditate upon their fate while watching lizards and stoically undergoing the profanation of moss and the greedy impertinence of climbing ivy.

All along the park, disappearing under the impenetrable shadows of the green oaks, ran an old wall, once the defence of a castle, and later made to serve as precinct of the garden. The strongly-masoned girdle opened at the main avenue with a large architectural entrance, where two imposing stone pillars, heavily mantled with ivy, held on corroded hinges a rusty elaborate gate.

The garden had been left to all its melancholy silence, a past page of history of the Tosinghi family. The caprice of old Prince Vieri had been respected even after his death. His son, Leopoldo, had permitted the thirty years to elapse before deciding to re-open the Villa Montegalli with a gay *villeggiatura* to dispel the gloomy souvenir of the past.

The old Tosinghi had been considered whimsical and eccentric. Nobody was actually surprised to see, on the very day after the funeral of his brother Bostico, the windows of the fine mansion closed and the workmen intent on masoning the door. People who imagined old Vieri under the spell of a sentimental fancy that time should change were strangers to his character; actually, he changed his mind in nothing.

The obstinacy to the absurd was legendary with the Tosinghi. Tradition said that at the battle of Campaldino—a battle which counted Dante Alighieri among the cavaliers—a Tosinghi, engaging a fierce contest, cried to his enemy, whom he had reduced to close quarters, "Step back"; and to the other's reply, "Impossible, a wall is at my shoulders," the terrible Tosinghi thundered, "Go back, you and the wall."

When Prince Leopoldo re-opened his Villa for the first time, Oddo, accompanying his cousin in this exploration, felt like one about to witness the unearthing of a buried monument, or that prickly curiosity a student might experience in breaking the seal of an old document.

The carriage reached early one morning the en-

trance to the grounds. The Castaldo was waiting at the open gate.

"Stop here," said the Prince. Descending from the vehicle he glanced up the long avenue that led majestically to the silent villa.

"My dear Oddo," he said after a moment of silence, "when that door was closed I was but a mere lad, and yet what is memory when refreshed by locality? Looking back at the long-forgotten event the memory of the past comes vividly to me. It seems only yesterday that my father left this place. I can see now the sad grey morning on which the long sombre procession of mourners wound down the road that led to the church."

"I visited that church once," said Oddo, "and had a curiosity to see Montegalli too, but I felt that your father would not overlook the intrusion. Besides, the old bailiff was the most trustworthy Cerberus of the bizarre order."

"Bizarre in a way. Bostico and my father were twins, which fact may have accounted for his great grief. Observer as you are, Oddo, I am certain you've noticed how sorrow often takes strange ways to give vent to feeling. Illogical, one may say, just as hysteria prompts a comic laugh to a soul in pain."

"There, one thing is certain," said Oddo, "the way society expresses grief does not represent any sorrow."

"You can judge if my father shocked his relatives when he refused to dress in mourning for his brother's death. Look, however, how grandly he nursed his grief by this absurdity. Absurdity, yes; that is the



view of society, incapable of understanding what is not written in her grammar."

"It is true," Oddo said, surprised that his cold diplomatic cousin, who thought so much of formality and society rules, should under the spell of a sad recollection burst out into such a subversive speech. In fact, Prince Leopoldo Tosinchi, a man who had hardly reached his fortieth year, was a man who would never have touched the complicated scaffolding of society. Sceptical, good-natured, at one time he had the opinion of Monsieur Pangloss that "all is for the best,"—even society evils and the impiety of its etiquette. The souvenir of his father, though, had brought a certain fire into his words and set aside the ashes that covered his too obsequious soul.

"How is the wife of the old Castaldo?" asked the Prince of the man that walked ahead with a bunch of rusty keys.

"As well as my grandmother's age allows. Your Excellency knows she is near ninety."

"The old woman," observed the Prince, "is one of the few survivors here that recollects old times."

Oddo cast his glance on the old garden : it suggested the idea of a long-forgotten graveyard.

Melancholy negligence reigned everywhere ; ferneries, rockeries, and terra-cotta vases were overrun by weeds ; plants bordering alleys had lost their former outline, together with stone-edged paths dappled with brilliant emerald moss. Inside the green plots, once rich with flowers of choice, crowding field-plants had conquered with an impervious forest of wild propaga-

tion. A few degenerated tulips and forget-me-nots yet struggling for life with the rude intruders peeped out here and there among scarlet poppies, and delicate yellow flowers timidly contested their golden cups with the aggressive crocus.

At the crossing of two wide avenues was a large marble basin left dry and empty since years. Greenish bricks at the bottom, which once harboured gold-fish, were now the mysterious lurking-place of lizards. Darkened lines left by the water-level bi-parted sharply in grey shades the nymph of the basin, bringing to mind the form of a half-clad female.

A sun-dial, where Roman figures were a mere suggestion, attempted to mark with the shadow of its needle the dreary hours of silence and abandon.

They reached the door of the Villa.

It was by no means an easy matter to induce the lock to yield. The Castaldo poured oil into it, and after great force the huge bolt gave way with a jar that sang like lamentation—like a human cry.

The door open, the brick wall appeared. Vieri Tosinghi had visibly scraped on the plaster the motto of the family—

CÆLO NON ANIMUS MUTO.

“How like a Tosinghi,” commented the Prince.

While the masons were hammering away at the brick wall the calm-browed Prince talked rather inconsistently, considering the solemnity of the moment, about the last oil harvest.

The resounding strokes of the large hammer evoked a low echo from the deserted rooms. Brick on brick fell down. When the breach was sufficiently wide the mouldy smell of a cellar struck the senses. The Castaldo lighted a lamp and entering the Villa opened the hall windows.

On the large vaulted ceiling of the hall mythological subjects were painted in fresco. The walls, following the style of the old Tuscan villas, had been left white. The many coats-of-arms of the Tosinghi were hung there to commemorate marriages. Some of those escutcheons bore the ensign of Florentine families. An antique sedan-chair stood at each side of the door, as if waiting for the old foppishly-garbed dames of centuries gone. Hardly a stratum of dust was noticeable on the dome-roofed palanquins.

When they reached the main floor, Prince Tosinghi, stopping at the top landing of the staircase, remarked to Oddo—

“How well I remember my last morning here ; the Villa was full of life.” Then leaning on the banister, and pointing to a seat down below, “There I recollect seeing my uncle Bostico, who was an inveterate hunter, caressing his dog after he had whipped it mercilessly for having missed a woodcock.”

“What do you think, cousin Leopoldo,” asked Oddo ; “was the death of Bostico Tosinghi really an accident ?”

“It might have been, and it might not. The body of my uncle Bostico was found lying at the foot of

that steep staircase that leads to the terrace,—accident, perhaps, yes—they said so many things at the time—even that he killed himself.”

“But why should he commit suicide?”

“Gossip had it he was in love with Oretta, your aunt, a famous flirt before and after marrying Florestano Saccetti.”

“I have never heard of it, though I knew she was lively.”

“That’s a nice way to put it, Oddo. By the way,” added the Prince, “is it true that scoundrelly cousin of yours, Alberto, is in Paris spending money he gained at Monte Carlo?”

“That’s what I have heard.”

“And we will hear later that he is back in Florence without a sou.” Alberto Saccetti had never been in the good graces of Prince Leopoldo Tosinchi.

Light was pouring now through the open windows of the ballroom. It was a strange sight, the large salon, deserted at the moment of Bostico’s death, left to its wild disorder—a most eloquent confusion, from which the scene that had passed thirty years before could be reconstructed with all the freshness of some recent incident. Chairs were scattered about everywhere; some coupled here and there, and others grouped together, pointed out the various gathering of guests; others lay fallen on the floor. A circular space in the middle of the room showed that the dance was in progress when the party had suddenly been broken up. Even in the alcove occupied by the orchestra the confusion was no less amongst the

music-racks. A score of music still hung from the balcony rail, the white sheet moved now by the draught giving a thrill of life to the great salon where death and stillness had fossilised everything.

"It may be fancy, but I seem to detect the special perfume of that very night mixed with the musty smell of a long-closed house," Prince Tosinghi remarked.

"It looks to me as if people had rushed out of the room pell-mell."

"It was a sudden scattering. Just imagine the commotion when my father entered and cried out, 'My brother is dead.' Bostico was dancing with pretty Oretta Saccetti only a few minutes before. He had left the room to give orders to the butler; that was the last time he was seen alive."

Among the dry bouquets of flowers scattered everywhere on the floor Oddo saw something white under a chair. He picked it up: it was a handkerchief lying with a long-stemmed rose faded and crumbled. Thoughtlessly he put the handkerchief to his nose; a slight prickling smell of dust offended his nostrils. The handkerchief was bordered with delicate lace, and marked with the initials "F. T."

"That was Fiammetta Tosinghi's handkerchief," said the Prince as he gazed at it.

"She who married Chevalier d'Erial?"

"Yes; I quite recollect her leaning against that gilded chair at the right of the door. She was just betrothed to Chevalier d'Erial, the French *attaché*. Hers was a sad life. Poor Metta, dead these twenty-

five years! You were hardly born, Oddo." As he looked at the chair where she had been sitting the proverb came to his mind, "Moglie e buoi dei paesi tuoi."

"As for the oxen," answered Oddo, piqued by this stupid maxim, "I see no reason why one shouldn't choose the ones of our own country. But as for wives—your proverb smells of prejudice."

"That may be; but proverbs are always the synopsis of past wisdom."

"Oh, indeed! Yet you cannot deny that many proverbs clash one with the other."

They passed through the long suite of rooms, the Castaldo following, taking notes of the work to be done.

When noon struck from the Villa belfry the Prince said, "Come, Oddo, let us go to lunch; I am famished."

When the two cousins were seated at the table under the shade of the large verandah of the *fattoria* the Prince asked—

"What's the matter, Oddo? you seem to be serious. Don't you know you haven't uttered a word since you left the Villa? All this exhuming of the past has made a deep impression upon you, has it not? But such is life after all—*tout passe, tout lasse, tout casse*. Cynical that, if you like, but true none the less."

"I was reminiscing over the fate of poor dead Fiammetta Tosinchi. Her handkerchief and flowers—such sterile souvenir of a night of happiness. Strange,

I cannot help thinking of all those people at the dance, now ashes for the most part. That room looked to me like a skeleton in velvet rags. Those gay dancers 'warm in love, now withering in the grave.'"

"Poet! Yet you are not new to this sentiment. Xerxes wept before his army at the thought that such a mass of men should be dead in a hundred years. His tears, however, did not prevent him from invading Greece, and by bloody contests hastening the regretted fate of many of those same subjects."

"Why love, any way?" cried Oddo hopelessly.

The Prince, who was intent on his plate, put down his fork, saying—

"What's the matter? Isidora tells me you are in love. It is true, then?"

"At my age it would be strange not to be," replied Oddo evasively.

"Yes—but since when? You were regarded as the hermit of the Villa degli Olmi, much to the desperation of Donna Giulia—'Oddo the invulnerable.' On what path did you meet the thorn that pierced your Achillian heel?"

"Cousin Leopoldo, you are a serious man, who has travelled the world over and seen many things; you differ from all my relatives, are the only one in whom I can confide. Please don't joke, for my case is serious. What shall I do? I am in love. It doesn't matter how long——"

"Why, if the girl is decent, as I presume she is, and of your caste and rich, go to her father and demand

her hand. I presume, like an orthodox lover, you believe her perfect, so——”

“Yes, she is indeed perfect,” Oddo affirmed with an energy intended to remove all doubt on that point. “If she has a defect in my eyes, it is one for which she is not responsible—she is perhaps too rich.”

Prince Tosinghi surveyed Oddo with wonder.

“There are many gentlemen in Florence,” he said dryly, “who would wish their wives had such a defect. I am not cynical; but gold is so rarely to be objected to. Even Christopher Columbus, who came within an inch of being canonised as a saint, wrote from the land of his discovery, ‘Gold, gold; with gold one can send even a soul to Paradise.’ Heavens! Oddo, don’t look at me with such a funereal expression. If it is true that gold is in your way, choose a poor girl, or still better for a dreamer of your kidney, go in for one whose father has plenty of debts to discharge. That would be truly noble.”

Oddo, who sat thinking, revolving his cousin’s words, perceived in them the old Italy prejudice on the subject of marriage. How many lances had he not broken against that rock? He knew all the canons of such marriages from Donna Giulia.

“Did you marry Isidora for money?” he snapped.

“Oh, mine was a different case,” the Prince answered. “You understand I have known Isidora since she was a child. But you, Oddo, do you know who this fair foreigner is?” Seeing on Oddo an unpleasant expression, he added, “I shouldn’t have spoken had you not encouraged me. Are you sure



the family is rich? To be an American doesn't imply rolling in money—especially when the money has to cross the Atlantic.”

“Listen, cousin Leopoldo; I am going to argue with you, using as well as I can the matrimonial vocabulary of our country. Granting she is rich, very rich—I presume all obstacles are removed, then?”

“Dear, no; not at all. Certainly a great many, though. But, Oddo, be sensible. Suppose I write the Consul over there—he's a friend of mine. Keep your head on your shoulders till I get an answer.”

“Write to the Consul? No. How could I look Helen Grahame in the face knowing that such a thing—such a disgusting thing—had been done?”

“I spoke with more wisdom than you imagine. It is only your infatuation for the girl that blinds you. Let me remind you, please, that you are a Palmieri, and not so badly off. To keep your position, however, you must have a contribution from the other side.”

“A dot?”

“Yes, a dot,” the Prince laughed cautiously. “I see nothing to justify that deprecating look on your face. Marriage involves great obligations; the family may increase. What possible objection can you have to a settlement?”

“Well, then, it seems to me extraordinary that, loving cousin Isidora as you do, you can stick to such traditional rot, not seeing the enormity of the Italian *matrimonio d'interesse*. I love Helen Grahame, though I am not certain whether or not she cares about me. But of one thing I am certain, and that is,

neither she nor I would ever consent to profane our love by swimming through the mire of marriage arrangements. Such contracts are equal to the buying and selling of a horse. Love plays no part in them."

Just then a large dish of *risotto* was brought to the table.

"Shall I tell you what I think?" said the Prince, eyeing the tempting dish. "We are two blessed fools, coming to lunch in this lovely spot and discussing matrimony. This is an excellent *risotto*, certainly more digestible than your theory. But let me say one thing, Oddo, that whatever you do I shall always consider you a capital good fellow. If you need a friend, here I am; I swear by our steaming *risotto*."

Oddo did not so readily loose the reins of his war-steed.

"But I am right."

## CHAPTER XVII.

## A COUNTRY PARTY.

THE Grahames, returned from Rome, had already been three days the guests of Princess Isidora Tosinghi at Villa Montegalli.

Palmieri began to worry over the slow progress his courtship was making. When his cousin Isidora told him the American ladies were included in the list of the invited, he thought at once of the many nooks at Montegalli where he might have Miss Grahame to himself, and plead his cause with his best eloquence.

It was a great disappointment, however, when he heard it was Prince Leopoldo's intention to open the hunting season by giving his *ricevimento annuale* at Montegalli. This annual reception included all his friends of the political and social world, and had hitherto taken place at his Villa Castello, near Florence.

Palmieri well remembered the uncongenial gathering of people, the confusion and stiffness of a reception where the political friends, with their *hortis*

*siccus* of shy wives and skinny daughters, and the social connection of Prince Tosinghi, were for once brought together. An air of embarrassment reigned, and nobody could afford to be himself in that mixed gathering.

But Prince Tosinghi was a member of Parliament; there were elections to manage. His reputation was of democratic character; he must, every twelve months at least, smile and fervently shake hands with influential men, and cause the humble ones to inform their good spouses that the festal shirt front must have an extra starching to pay proper respect to Prince Tosinghi.

Palmieri had no objection to the democratic tendencies of his cousin; but he did not see the propriety of having these affairs at Montegalli. Castello had always been the place for these receptions that the stiff-necked friends of his cousin called the *kermesse* of Prince Tosinghi, and which were defined by Count Scartabelli as a torchlight procession of shoemakers at mid-day.

But the Prince was adamant, and no argument of Oddo's could dissuade him from holding his reception at Montegalli.

"All the servants are here," said the Prince to remonstrating Oddo; "Castello is under repair. If I don't have the *kermesse*, as you call it, there will be a revolution among my electors and humbler friends. I might just as well ask the Government to put a stop to the *fête* of San Giovanni, our patron saint of Florence. People count on my reception as

farmers look forward to the fireworks of the 24th of June."

"It looks to me like the rehearsal of your funeral," said Oddo; "I can see some of those country aldermen ruminating their speeches for such a capital occasion to display their oratory. Our country politicians are famed for their declamatory eloquence."

"It may be; but are you sure," said the Prince with a sly glance, "that only politicians are preparing speeches? Don't be peevish, Oddo. Isidora has invited your Americans to spend several days at Montegalli,—you'll have your chance."

Seeing his cousin was a mind-reader, Oddo retorted with a "Very well, cousin Leopoldo, exhibit your political menagerie!"

A few days later a string of carriages began arriving at the Villa entrance. Crash of whip and sound of horse-bells alternated with the whiff-whiff and the teuff-teuff of the motor. Prince Alti with his gay four-in-hand entering the gate in a style that justified his reputation of first-rate whip; the boiled-lobster-like motor of Marquis Colti followed, packed with ladies looking as dusty and sporty as motoring demands. Then, by way of contrast, the modest run-about of a country landowner entered the gate, very much like a tramp in its shabby attire and lack of varnish. The plebeian intruder was the faithful henchman of the Prince at election time. The comical note was struck by Lieutenant Guardafossi, who, a span distance in the rear of the country gig, drove the most

ridiculous-looking dog-cart Florence had ever beheld. Behind him sat a groom, garbed in a livery that to the mind of Guardafossi must have represented English style, but was as far from the original as the reproductions of British types on the Italian operatic stage. The chin buried in a high collar, his back turned to his master, the poor fellow held, with the respectful solemnity due a sacred relic, the elaborate walking-stick of his master. It was evident that he had been commanded to sit erect, and that he needed still to get accustomed to his extraordinary clothes.

"The world is now complete: the rich, the poor, and the fools," mused Palmieri.

He noted with pleasure what a poor show Guardafossi made in plain clothes. Notwithstanding his foppish attire the gay Lieutenant still very much resembled a peacock with its plumes plucked.

The opening of Villa Montegalli had taken the form of an old-fashioned reception of *corte bandita*, where Palmieri had the meagre satisfaction of seeing Helen Grahame only in the company of others.

Though Palmieri could not endure the presence of Santacroce among the *intimes* who had stayed over at Villa Montegalli after the reception, what, he asked himself, had induced cousin Isidora to keep that caricature Guardafossi, unless it were for the hunt Prince Tosinghi had arranged for that morning? It was notorious that hunting was the only manly sport in which the Lieutenant condescended to.

An idea came to Oddo. "Suppose I decline to join

the hunters? Guardafossi will be out of the way, and there may be a chance of seeing Helen Grahame alone. Yes, the idea of staying at home isn't a bad one."

So when Prince Tosinchi called him to join the hunt he pled fatigue.

"You must come, Oddo," the Prince insisted; "we cannot dispense with your company just because you feel—what did you call it?—tired. Come along, and after lunch, if really you want to leave the hunt, I'll give you a *posta*—near the villa." So perforce Oddo, a few minutes later, trudged off with a gun on his shoulder and a grudge in his bosom.

Of one thing he was glad—not a single hare had passed his *posta*, when at last he heard the bugle summoning them to the tent for lunch.

It might have been a quixotic sentiment—for Palmieri had been fond of it—but he now experienced a sudden dislike for hunting. His new sentiment was due to this: One day in the Galleria degli Arazzi, Miss Grahame and he were standing before a rare tapestry representing a royal hunt.

"Look at those poor helpless animals," she had said, "being chased by a pack of brutes!"

Palmieri, who had been guilty of killing many of these same helpless animals, stammered out, "Then you don't think hunting a manly sport?"

"Manly!" was the answer, "how can there be any manliness in killing a defenceless creature? It is only a *savage* who could think so."

Palmieri had argued eloquently for the noble sport, but now the words "cruel," "heartless," set him thinking. He recollected what a shock he had received the first time he had killed a hare, how the joy of the good shot was marred by sight of the wounded animal shivering in agony at his feet. Since this long-forgotten experience his sensibilities had grown hardened, and he enjoyed killing with the best, till Helen's words brought back an echo of the sentiment he had felt when a boy.

At lunch several dozen hares were lying in rows on the ground or hanging from the branches of the trees. Palmieri looking at them saw through Helen's eyes. That gathering of men, where each related his exploits with heroic emphasis as if Numean monsters had been slain, appeared to him like a pack of fools, —as fool he would have appeared to them had they been able to read his thoughts.

Life after all greatly resembles the multi-coloured kaleidoscope that at a slight touch changes forms. Close your ears to music in a ballroom and the gliding figures become an assembly of grotesque jumping merry-andrews. Oddo was wise to keep his views on hunting to himself.

When the hunters started off for their afternoon sport he took the last place in the line nearest Montegalli, and there, with his gun lying at his side, he waited the chance to make a decent escape.

The Villa faced him from over the copse on the opposite hill, and he could see forms moving about in the shade, and hear voices as they were now and



then conveyed to him by the straying breeze. Sometimes the voices were quite distinct. Was that Helen laughing? Who could be making her laugh? Certainly not Santacroce nor that old bore of a Marchese Ajazzi. What if Guardafossi had had the same idea as himself and left the hunt with less scruple? But Guardafossi could never cause her to break into such a laugh—the laugh he had learned to love. Why should she laugh anyway? It annoyed him. Would he prefer, then, that she mope during his absence?

Oddo picked up his gun in an absent-minded way, giving it a survey as if it really interested him, snapped the lock once or twice, examined the carving, the gilded letters of the maker's name,—looked in fact, as if he meditated seriously over it all.

What unforeseen events! Had he been told a few months before that he was going to fall in love—above all with an American girl—and become actually silly about it, too, he would have scoffed at the prediction emphatically. His opinion of American girls had been that they were superabundant in all: too loud, too frank, too rich, too much of everything with them. But that was before love had entered his heart, begun to torture him like the shirt of Nessus. Would Helen refuse him? Was she not in love with him? or—horrible thought—was she already engaged?

The sound of the hunting-horn and several shots in the direction of the next sloping hill awoke him from his reveries; the hunt, judging from noisy shouts, was at its thickest.

"Buffoons," growled Oddo, like a dog disturbed in his slumber. He could see the smoke from each shot and mentally calculate the time it would take before he heard the report.

"They are very far; they must have shifted while I sat here," he thought.

A boy was passing down below beating the bushes with his *pertica* to start the game. He whistled cheerfully while performing his work. Oddo recognised him as the son of the Castaldo.

"What are you doing there, Carlo?"

"We have just received the order to advance. The hunters have moved towards Strozzavolpe: I am the last of the line."

"I say, Carlo!"

"Yes, *Vossignoria*."

"If you see the Castaldo or meet *Sua Eccellenza*, tell them I have gone back to the Villa."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## ARIADNE IN THE LABYRINTH.

HAVE you ever thought of the strange phenomena that science failing to explain has christened with the indigestible name telepathy?

One of these mysterious and subtle wafts must have passed near Oddo. He had entered the Villa's gate on his way to the terrace, where he expected to find Helen Grahame, but half-way up the *stradone* he stopped, turned abruptly down a side path, and emerged into a little bushy square. Here he discovered Helen seated on a bench within the dappled shade of the trees. She looked youthfully lovely to Oddo as she sat there, her elbow resting on the griffined arm of the old marble seat.

"Miss Grahame," he exclaimed, "alone! I thought you were on the terrace. I came by here through a mere chance."

Colour suffused her clear complexion as she looked up to see the young Italian in his green corduroy shooting-suit.

"Mamma started playing bridge with Marchese

Ajazzi, and now they are all playing. I never care for games, so finding a book I came out to this lovely corner. And you? But I know what *you* have been doing! How many poor innocent animals have you slaughtered to-day?"

"You need not rebuke me, Miss Grahame, for my hands are stainless. Look!" and he held them up for inspection. "As a matter of fact," he explained with a laugh, "I didn't have any chance to shoot."

"That's owing to me," she said solemnly; "I prayed that you shouldn't have."

It was Oddo's turn to feel a burning flush, hardly perceptible under his brown skin.

"Had any game passed my gun I'd have shot into the clouds," he said simply. "I was thinking to-day of that talk we once had. If Saint Hubert had known you there would have been no need for the 'miracle of the deer.'"

"The silence of the woods has inspired you, I see, to well-turned compliments. I had quite forgotten the legend. I like legends—don't you? There is a hidden charm in them. Look at those shining acanthus leaves there under that stone, it reminds me of the Greek story—— I was thinking of you only a minute ago."

"You were!"

"Yes; I wanted to know the name of the architect who invented the Corinthian capital."

"Oh! It was Callimachus of Corinth, I believe," he answered. Then after a silence: "So that was what made you think of me?"

"No, I was thinking, too, that you are my encyclopedia."

"That's fine—the idea of being put upon your shelf, even if you sandwiched me between Johnson and Webster."

"You might find the dash of mustard too hot for you."

Although Palmieri was quite conversant with foreign idiom, he was often hampered by the exact meaning of some phrases. Helen's reply was ambiguous. Not to risk sliding on thin ice he sought diversity by saying—

"What a stupid party this has been. I can never be alone with you. And I've been longing for a talk."

"I haven't found it stupid. The Princess's friends are very amusing, and then there is always something fresh to explore in this enchanting old villa. For instance, I had an idea, when I came down here, that I'd like to try going through the maze over there."

Just in front of them was the entrance of an old labyrinth. In time gone by no Italian garden was considered perfect without one of these intricated meanders. Gradually patient branches had been induced to form a green archway; on either side of this opening was a marble sphinx. Colourless and expressionless, weary of looking at each other for centuries, the two sphinx stood as if waiting to propound to the intruder their insolvable riddle.

"But why didn't you? Isn't the entrance large enough?"

"I was afraid."

"Of meeting the ghost of Bostico Tosinghi? They say he has chosen it as his abiding-place."

"No; I was afraid of getting lost."

"Come, let us walk into it together. I shall be your guide, if you'll allow me."

They reached the green opening of the labyrinth. Helen led the way, gracefully lifting her skirt, from under which the shimmering lace foamed like champagne. With the rustle of her step a wave, as if compounded of a thousand roses, came to Oddo. His artist sense, love-steeped, was wrapped in the emanation of her beauty. Few women, he thought, could claim such physical perfection. As Helen looked back, framed by the deep emerald of the archway, she appeared to him like a wood-nymph peering from her leafy sanctuary. He could have knelt before this exquisite creature vested in the glory of immortal youth.

"What if we lose our way," Helen said thoughtfully. "I was looking down from my window on the labyrinth yesterday night. It was bright moonlight, and I could trace all the winding paths. It looked like a puzzle. Dedalus himself couldn't have imagined anything more intricate."

"Cousin Tosinghi has shown me how to get round. At every corner there lies a slab, hidden under the bush, to tell the way. Beside, if we get lost, I'll cut a passage for you through the box."

"With that little penknife with which you sliced that acanthus leaf a few minutes ago? It would be a heroic enterprise."

"Love has inspired mightier deeds."

"It must be eternal love, then, to last as long as the work." She gave a little laugh that provoked Oddo.

"It is," he affirmed succinctly.

They walked silently along. Outside of his heavy step only the swish of her petticoats was heard. They came after some minutes to a point where the path divided.

"Suppose we take the wrong way?" demanded Helen.

"In time we'd probably find ourselves back here again."

Helen paused at the preplexing twin-path.

"And now, right or left?" she asked.

"Let me see." And Oddo, kneeling down, parted the bushes while he sought for the guiding sign.

Helen stooped also to look at the quaint tablet, and in doing so a stray loop from her nebulous halo lightly brushed Oddo's cheek. It was an electric spark that shot a thrill through him.

Helen's escape was a narrow one. Oddo had an overpowering desire to take her lovely head in both hands and cover it with kisses.

Unconscious of the conflagration she had caused, Miss Grahame looked at the slab. "It is dated," she said; "I can read distinctly the figures under the arrow."

"Yes, it's the date when the garden was laid out." The information was absently delivered: Oddo was still conscious of the sear Helen's tress had left. He

looked guiltily into the young eyes turned inquiringly on him.

They entered into the central point of the labyrinth, the place Helen had seen from her window—a circular space where paths converged into five entrances opening in archways through the box. Niches cut in the green mass sheltered five statues of goddesses. A stone bench stood in front of each pedestal. From the stagnant pond emerged a moss-capped statue of Cupid triumphantly held by Tritons waist-deep in the water. White water-blossoms floated on their heart-shaped leaves.

“Let us sit here, near Minerva,” said Helen, selecting the niche where the Goddess of Wisdom stood proudly holding her shield, unaware that neglectful age had wiped Medusa’s nose clean away.

Was that a warning, Oddo wondered.

“Do you think I need wisdom?” he inquired.

“How should I know?”

“Wisdom sometimes is a bore,” said Oddo. “I begrudge Minerva’s tendency to transform life into a funeral.”

“Shall we change our seat for a merrier goddess?”

“The expression of the others is not more cheerful,” he remarked.

“Besides, she affords us at least a shady place.” Helen looked towards the Villa Montegalli: “Minerva and Juno are, I believe, the only goddesses I can’t see from my window. I can just glimpse the heads of the others.”



Palmieri cast a quick sidelong glance in the direction of the Villa. From where they were seated not even the roof was visible. The sun was going down, shadows were gradually growing longer. Would he have another such chance?

"Miss Grahame, I should like to say something to you,—I don't know if I ought—it may be unwise—it—might eventually look ridiculous to you——"

"Aren't you trying to be prudent instead of wise? There is no danger that anything you say to me will be turned into ridicule."

"Will you let me go to the end—listen to *all*?"

"Certainly. Haven't you found me a good listener?"

Oddo poured out all his soul. He told her how he had been struck by her loveliness the night at Prince Tosinghi's ball, how lonely he had felt after she had left Florence, how anxious he had been to write her about his love, but he feared to do so lest it destroy all hope. But now that she was going back to America he must learn his fate.

Helen, as she attentively listened, traced on the ground with the point of her parasol horizontal lines as far as she could reach, then verticals. When Oddo had come to a stop Helen looked undecided,—she went on thinking, as if a few more lines were needed to the pattern before she could make up her mind. As for Palmieri, in his agitation he had delivered his wooing speech well. He had often speculated on what he would say to Miss Grahame; he felt now how much his passion had assisted him.

The checker-work done, Helen made a border round

it. Oddo wondered, now that the pattern was girdled, whether the answer would come.

"Mr Palmieri, tell me honestly, to how many girls have you made the same speech?"

"What makes you think——" stammered Oddo.

"I am told that Italians have hearts like artichokes—every girl may have a leaf."

"But the heart of the artichoke! When all the leaves are gone then the core comes—the best part."

Oddo's answer was accompanied by a grimace, intended to be a smile—the expression of a clown who has received a kick, and cries with comedy painted on his face.

"But, Mr Palmieri," said Helen with a laugh, "are you sure that all the leaves are gone?" It was one of those little laughs which does not rob a phrase of its significance.

"Please, Miss Grahame, I am in earnest. Don't put me in the list of Guardafossis. Rather tell me that you have no place in your heart for me,—that I have no chance,—and I'll leave Montegalli to-night, disappear, and nurse my sorrow alone. But do not think I don't love you, that it is a mere incident of my life: it is all my life—all."

"Forgive me." Helen was moved at his tone and the sight of two tears he was trying hard to repress. "You see, I am hardly acquainted with your country—though I *have* noticed how easily men declare their love to a girl they hardly know."

"Guardafossi's been proposing," declared Oddo, fire now in his eyes. "I'll kill the conceited coxcomb."

"My remark wasn't personal."

The rebuke set him to consider, if Guardafossi had a systematic course for making love, he too was guilty,—some of the phrases he had used in his enthusiasm were, in truth, old to his repertory. How often a man shams love, to regret having shammed it when love comes really!

"You are right," he answered, "in saying this is a country where we trifle too much with love. I cannot plead for an exception. You are right—perfectly so, not to believe me any more than Guardafossi."

"Oh, Mr Palmieri, do not say *that*! I confess I believe you are—different from the others."

It was a cry from Helen's heart. Her sentiments were all in a tangle. The stern figure of her father rose to mind. What would he say, prejudiced as he was against foreigners? How often she had heard him express his ideas, and in not the most elegant language. Helen's heart beat fast—she could feel it throbbing against her corset.

"Helen," Oddo pleaded in a voice that had the charm of minor tune, "will you give me a chance—a chance to prove my love? I can't bear to lose you, and—if you go to America——"

"But you—will come there some day? Please don't say a word more now—promise."

"I promise," said Oddo exultingly. Words had no value now that he knew Helen was not indifferent to him.

For a time silence reigned within the labyrinth—an *entr'acte* that sealed the convention and gave time

for the *dramatis personæ* to accustom themselves to the new situation.

A frog jumped into the pond. Oddo thought the splash louder than one could expect from a leaping frog.

"What was that?" said Helen, breaking the ice of the silence.

"Only a frog that dived from one of the Triton's heads."

Helen looked at the pond. The statue of Cupid had a broken bow and a very shattered quiver. She was about to make some remark on the fact, when her handkerchief dropped. Oddo stooped to pick it up, but Helen was too quick for him; she recaptured it, saying—

"There is a secret inside this *fazzoletto*."

"What is it?"

"You are too curious. It is a secret known to one person only."

Oddo's expression of jealousy was almost ugly.

"And who, may I ask, is the favoured one?"

"How amusing you look. Mayn't I have a secret; or do you insist upon knowing everything?"

"Do tell me, please!"

"Well, the possessor of the wonderful secret is myself. There is a ball of thread inside the handkerchief. Now, are you satisfied, Ser Curioso?" She laughed with a little spice of devilry.

Oddo thought more than once that Helen's teasing expressions were irresistible—her face was so pretty with its questioning look; the mouth, a trifle arched

as if sketching a laugh, and gaiety sparkling in her eyes.

"I see that I have compromised myself," she went on; "an explanation is necessary. Early this morning I vowed I would visit the labyrinth, it looked so enticing from my window. So I asked the house-keeper for a spool of thread, and she brought me this. It's wool. I wonder if she imagined I wanted it to darn stockings, or perhaps knit a pin-cushion in country style?"

"Ah, Ariadne's clue?"

"But this Ariadne was afraid her thread might break, and so, not finding a Theseus, she kept out of the labyrinth!"

"You don't really think one could get lost in here?—this isn't the Catacombs. You would only have to call for help, and Marchese Ajazzi would be delighted, I am sure, to rescue the Ariadne of Montegalli from her island of Naxos. Poor Ajazzi looks more like a Neptune on half-pay than a Bacchus; but that would be a trifling matter in mythology."

"How absurd!" said Helen, laughing at the idea of old Marchese Ajazzi coming to her assistance.

"Yet not to get lost in the labyrinth, all Marchese Ajazzi would have to do would be to tie his white beard to the box-tree at the entrance and let it unroll as he moves on."

"It certainly would be safer and stronger than this yarn." And Helen threw high in the air the red ball.

Two intentions met: two clasped hands caught the clue.

This time Oddo could not resist a temptation.

"You promised——" said Helen.

"But I haven't said a word."

"You were eloquent all the same."

She sat a little apart, closely examining the ball. Oddo felt in suspense like a child who had done a mischief.

"And now, Mr Palmieri, will you *please* show me the way out of this labyrinth!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

## GOOD-BYE.

ONLY a few minutes before the departure of the evening express to Paris.

Slamming doors were heard, the porter had shouted over and over again the meaningless word, *Partenza!*

With bags and bundles, running frantically up and down the platform, were the usual late travellers.

After the engine-whistle, the toot of the horn, and the clink of the bell—the three Italian alarms,—the locomotive gave a long hiss, breathed heavily, then puffing out clouds of smoke, began to move.

“Good-bye.”

“*Arrivederci*, remember your promise.”

“Yes, yes. And you——”

It was an unusually long train. Oddo watched it torpidly evolving in serpent-like curves over the net of shining rails. His gaze followed it vanishing into the dark of the night. One moment he thought he could locate a waving handkerchief, then the huge mass grew indistinct, the two ruby lights studding the back

of the train grew fainter and fainter till, at a sharp curve of the road, they disappeared brusquely.

Oddo stood a few minutes persistently looking in the direction the train had disappeared; then he turned on his heel and made his way out of that maze of sheds that Florentines have ennobled with the name of Stazione Centrale.

"When shall I see her again?" mused Oddo, Helen's waving handkerchief still in his mind.

Bright-coloured hotel omnibuses zigzagged his path at every step. A train just in from Rome: the vehicles filled with smart travellers, and loaded with trunks, drove quickly off to the city.

A cab passed near Palmieri. The coachman recognising his patron, stopped the horse.

"Shall I take you up to your villa to-night?" he asked.

"*No grazie*," Palmieri answered.

Absorbed in thoughts of Helen Grahame, he slowly took his way on foot toward the hill of San Domenico.



**PART SECOND**

**P A R I S**



## CHAPTER I.

### PARIS.

"No, Monsieur, il n'y a rien pour vous," said the clerk of the hotel, while busy distributing the morning's mail.

Palmieri glanced at the pigeon-hole with the number of his room, to ascertain the truth of the clerk's statement. A telegram was on the desk. Oddo—like a true lover hoping against hope—picked it up: it might be from Helen.

"That is for 'Monsieur le Baron,'" said the clerk, and taking the blue envelope, placed it aside with other correspondence.

"Monsieur le Baron"—a man so popular in the hotel as to dispense with his name—had almost grown to be Oddo's imaginary enemy. Every other letter seemed to be for him; besides, he was getting tired of hearing the refrain, "Rien pour vous, Monsieur."

"What can be the matter? Why doesn't Helen write?"

Oddo turned in the direction of the little reading-room of the hotel.

A servant had just placed fresh pens and paper on the table.

"I believe I'll write again."

He seated himself at the desk, and the quill began to glide over the paper, keeping pace with his thoughts.

"I might sail Saturday by the Transatlantic steamer," he meditated at a moment of standstill. "Now my book is published there is nothing to keep me here." Then he nibbled the end of the quill, while weighing the possibility of this project. "I might land in New York *insalutato ospite*, incognito—she made me promise. But what can be causing her silence——"

He went on writing.

"Before I left Florence I went to Montegalli to see cousin Isidora. But what a desert! You can imagine why. I was always watching the door where we stood talking in the salon that last night, imagining I saw your dear face, when I knew only too well that you were on the ocean, with every passing minute widening the distance between us.

"That night I stepped out on the balcony of my room and saw the window from where you told me you stood watching the labyrinth. My stay so far had been a continual evocation of your visit at Montegalli. From there the maze was as you described; the full moon, only muffled now and then by passing clouds, brought out, in contrast with shady intervals, every minute detail of the place. 'Why not recall the happiest moments of my life?' I

thought, and I stole out in the garden and took the winding path that leads to the pond. Don't think me too lyric, Helen, I could have wept. A terrible loneliness crept over me,—the consciousness of a great want was everywhere within that still-born place. I sat on our bench in a trance, and looked again at the harmless and disarmed Cupid, guarded by the cold inanimate goddesses, motionless and white, under the silver rays of the moon. What stillness! only the little fretting of the water. Even the poor white lilies, cradled in their green barques, slept. A strange feeling seized me, a sense of deadness pervaded everything.

"One branch of box protruded from behind Minerva's pedestal: the same, I recollected, that had brushed your cheek. Do you remember, Helen, how more than once, while talking, you pushed it aside? It was not a fancy: that branch moved—its leaves were slightly shaken by the breeze. It gave the impression of being the only thing alive there. Shall I tell you all? I imitated the wind and kissed the branch that had plagued you. *Basta*, you will say, with that pretty arched mouth of yours."

"*Basta*," repeated Oddo to himself, and closing the letter, started for a stroll on the boulevards.

"There is a gloom in deep love as in deep water; there is a silence in it which suspends the foot; and the folded arms and the dejected head are the image it reflects."

Landor's words passed through Oddo's mind as he

stood before the window of the "Transatlantic Company" on the Boulevards des Capucines studying the lines on the map between Havre and New York,—insignificant-looking lines which meant so much to him.

Yes, he would take the *Lorraine*, Saturday.

Newsboys were running the street, shouting 'La Presse.' Oddo bought a paper, and looked up and down the columns, seeking reviews of new books.

"La Vente de la collection Saccetti." Under the usual heading, "Hôtel Drouot," the name of his cousin Alberto caught Oddo's eye. The article was a long one; it informed the public that a sale of objects belonging to Count Saccetti of Florence—a large and choice collection—would take place the end of the following week.

Oddo called to mind the sensational rumours spread throughout Florence of his cousin Alberto's good luck at Monte Carlo. From the first he had had doubts about this suddenly-made fortune, nor had joined with his mother in admiring his "successful cousin." In her profound worship of wealth Donna Giulia never troubled herself about its origin. His doubts had increased when he learned that the old palace of the Saccetti had been refurnished in all its former grandeur, that the statues of the courtyard, sold to Bandini the Antiquarian by the spendthrift, Florestano Saccetti, had been replaced in their vacant niches. Now everything was clear: the auction confirmed his suspicions. He saw that Bandini was behind the scenes, and that Alberto, while lending an

illustrious name, was merely a decoy in the Antiquarian's hand.

Oddo read through the article which gave the history of the illustrious Florentine family of Saccetti, with its long line of warriors, ambassadors, and magistrates. The account concluded with unusual cunning. It did not state that the collection had been in possession of the Saccetti for centuries, but that it contained several valuable objects, which were heirlooms. Among these was a fine sword that had belonged to Cece Saccetti, who fell at the battle of Monteperti.

"The sword of Cece Saccetti," repeated Oddo with a smile. The smile froze on his face as he read on: "Among the objects of art is a rare clay bust called 'Simonetta,' attributed to Desiderio da Settignano, and representing Simona Acciaiuoli, wife of Lorenzo Saccetti."

"'Simonetta,' the very name I carved on the bust! It must have been on seeing it that the idea of this fraud suggested itself to that villain Bandini!"

It was added that the bust of Simonetta was supposed to have been lost at the time of the Savonarola bonfires, but the present Count Saccetti, following a family tradition that it was hidden somewhere in the Palace, had made a search and solved the mystery: the long-lost Simonetta had been found walled up in an empty niche of the courtyard.

## CHAPTER II.

## AT THE HÔTEL RITZ.

IN one of the richly-furnished rooms of the Hôtel Ritz, Oddo Palmieri and his cousin Saccetti had been having a spirited discussion without arriving at any tangible conclusion, as is often the case when adversaries lose their temper.

It was certain that Saccetti was in the wrong, and that he knew it; but Oddo had exasperated him with his violent words.

"If you were not my cousin," said Oddo, "I know what I should do."

"What would you do?" asked Saccetti.

"Go straight to the 'Procureur de la Republique' and denounce you and Bandini."

"But you don't seem to realise how your name would figure in the affair. You must consider that you are in a way responsible. Indeed, it would look odd to see the author of a book on artistic frauds mixed up with one of the very tricks he has so cleverly exposed. By the way, I forgot to congratulate you on your success. Your book reads quite like



a novel. What a pity, though, it lacks the due amount of nastiness that gives spice to modern books. Keep that in mind for your next work. Now ladies have come to the front by writing *un tas d'ordures soigneusement enveloppées*, you mustn't remain behind. Yet when it comes to tainted literature, I prefer the experience of a Lola Montez or a Cora Pearl; there is more aroma of genuineness——”

“Alberto, stop that. What's come over you of late? Have you lost all sense of honour? No doubt you would like to spot me with your mud.”

Oddo's words had their effect on his cousin.

“You were always wrong in judging me,” he answered in a milder tone. “You know very well I should never have become your accuser; but Bandini might—and you know what kind of man he is. He can turn white into black as easily as he can turn new into old.”

“Why haven't you talked in this way before? Do break away from that man, Alberto. He exults in lowering one of our class. Let me help you out of this net.”

“It is impossible, Oddo.”

“But why?”

No answer.

“If I were in your place, I should return to Florence. Come, Alberto, I'm going to see you off to-night.”

“No, Oddo, there's nothing you can do for me. Don't interfere while I am in Paris; it would only make matters worse. If I need your assistance, I'll let you know.”

Oddo could see plainly that his cousin had been bound and gagged by Bandini.

"Do you know if the auctioneer has put a reserve price on the bust?" he asked. "I could try to buy it back—if it doesn't go too high."

"I don't know; but I'll see what can be done about it. *Arrivederci*, Oddo,—I must be going."

Oddo stood looking after his cousin as he drove away.

"Poor fellow!" he said, as the carriage disappeared up the Rue de la Paix. "I wonder if he realises his situation and is ashamed of himself?"

Anxious to know all he could about the Saccetti sale, Palmieri hailed a cab and drove to the Hôtel Drouot.

At the famous auction-rooms a sale was already in progress. There were the habitual crowds of people going up and down the stairs; buyers hurrying off with their purchases, and vans full of objects to be discharged into the store-rooms.

Everybody was busy at that moment. Palmieri questioned a clerk, but could learn little beside what he already knew from newspapers: only that some of the objects were stored there, and others were expected.

Those unacquainted with public sales can hardly have an idea what they are.

The Hôtel des Ventes is a benevolent harbour, welcoming every imaginable object.

Time was when this method of selling was carried on in the open air. The original sales, *sub hasta*,

afforded the Roman soldiers an easy way of disposing of their booty. A spike was planted in the ground to point out the place of the sale, hence this peculiar mode of alienation was called *sub hasta*.

Up to the present time the custom has not essentially changed—that is, objects are still disposed of to the highest bidder. However, the comfortable rooms of the Hôtel de Ventes of to-day have, like a favoured hothouse, cultivated a variety of genus that now stand between the auctioneer and the buyer.

Beside the *commissaire priseur* (the auctioneer), there are the *expert*, the *crieur*, and other inferior parasites.

The most striking figure is, of course, the *commissaire priseur*—the public official and monarch of the sale. He is a king whose throne is the rostrum, his sceptre a hammer that with a blow knocks down objects to the highest bidder.

Of the characteristic personages of his court, certainly the noisiest one, if not the most conspicuous, is the *crieur*, whose mission there seems to be to repeat the auctioneer's words and gabble about the special attractions of objects.

Where, one asks, does the man with such powerful lungs come from,—the man who for hours can shout like a fanatic and outdo the vocal persistence of the strongest-voiced muezzin of the highest minaret?

*Expert* is a grandiloquent word: it conveys at one time both the idea of knowledge and of long experience, or at least the quality of being skilled in some

one thing. In Paris any one who chooses to call himself an *expert*, or imagines that such title adds prestige to his visiting-card, is welcome to it.

One can hardly understand the reason for an *expert* where the value of a thing is determined by bidding; yet in France no auction could be considered complete without this personage.

There was a sale of paintings in progress in one of the rooms. Although works of dubious value, the interest was great, judging from the crowd disputing over the lot of third-rate canvases.

Palmieri entered, and, taking a back seat, scanned the heterogeneous crowd that represented almost every characteristic Parisian type—from the *auvergnat* to the showy-looking banker in white waistcoat and heavy gold watch-chain.

"Il y a marchand pour cent francs," shouted the *crieur*, meaning that some one had already offered one hundred francs for the picture—an inferior Dutch painting that the *expert* had styled an Obbema.

"Oh, la belle croûte," commented some one after examining the canvas.

"One hundred francs," repeated the auctioneer, swinging his hammer in the air in short curves. "Not for one hundred francs? Ten francs, then," he said,—proving that the hundred francs was an imaginary price germinated in the fertile brain of the *crieur*.

Strange to say, the daub reached the price of a thousand francs. When the hammer fell the *commissaire priseur* announced—

"Adjudged to Monsieur Leopard."

"Leopard is buying his own canvas—the so-called Obbema," said the man in front of Palmieri. "I saw it last week in his shop in Rue Lafayette."

The observation was made to a man sitting next him.

"Yes; Leopard has a Dutch goose to pluck—some customer who is fond of Dutch paintings," answered the other, who seemed acquainted with the ambient of the Hôtel des Ventes; so he proposes to put a high price on his canvas."

"How is that?" asked the other.

"Oh, it's simple enough! That isn't an Obbema any more than I am the President of the Republic. Probably Leopard hasn't paid more than thirty francs for his *croûte*. He has sent it to the auction and had it catalogued for an Obbema, then he comes and buys it in. Don't you see; after he has paid a slight percentage on the sale, he'll have a receipt and be able to show that the painting cost him a thousand francs."

Palmieri was getting interested in the conversation.

Another canvas was being carried round for examination: it was labelled "Sacra Famiglia." The *expert* loftily asserted that it was the work of Andrea del Sarto, adding at the same time, in a tone of one imparting new information, that the artist had family troubles, and was not always equal to his reputation.

"*Encore un 'cheval de retour'?*" said some one in a far corner of the room.

"What's a *cheval de retour*?" inquired the man who sat in front of Palmieri.

"A horse coming back to the stable," answered the well-informed friend: "a painting that figures at so many sales before finding a permanent master that its reappearance becomes a byword. I've sometimes seen a *cheval de retour* come under the hammer for years before finding an owner."

The Andrea del Sarto, alias *cheval de retour*, was knocked down for a few francs to the first bidder.

Another *chef-d'œuvre* succeeded — a so-called portrait of Velasquez. This time the conscientious *expert* had the decency to inform the public that, in his belief, the painting was only of the Velasquez school.

The auctioneer, who was getting tired himself of the sham old masters, hurried on with—

"An offer, messieurs? Who offers?"

"Fifteen francs."

"*Voyons, soyez raisonnable!*" said the *crieur*, pretending to be scandalised by the offer.

"Three dollars; that isn't much for a Spanish school," remarked an American student.

At thirty francs a purchaser was found, who, after taking a nearer view of the canvas, did not appear satisfied with his bargain.

"An awful daub! It is all retouched — painted over and over again," he remarked.

"You are lucky," answered the imperturbable *crieur*. "You have not only a Velasquez, but a stratum of old masters over it—a whole *school* for thirty francs."

Paintings of the same kind kept pouring into the saleroom.

"From this crowd," Oddo mused as he left the Hôtel des Ventes, "one would think that the scum of Paris was indulging in art traffic."

## CHAPTER III.

## RETROSCENA.

GASPERO BANDINI had taken a small apartment in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, Paris.

The ground floor was used for storing empty boxes. In the upper rooms of the *entresol*, where Bandini lived, objects were scattered everywhere. On the chimney-piece stood the reliquary Bandini stole from the church of Volterra, and of which Count Saccetti in his first transaction with the Antiquarian had given legal proof of ownership. On second thoughts Bandini decided not to put the *chef-d'œuvre* on sale. The alterations he had done on the piece were slight, and from the niellos and the characteristic setting of the precious stones the casket might be recognised.

Count Alberto Saccetti had put a bee in the bonnet of the Antiquarian by saying that an *attaché* of the Italian Embassy, an apt connoisseur of old relics, was already interested in the sale.

When Rubelli entered the room the reliquary had been carefully replaced in its leather box, and Bandini was busy with the catalogue of the sale. As the



former sat down to his work he threw an inquiring glance at his master, to see what kind of mood he was in. Lately he had noticed a gradual change in him; for such a close-mouthed rascal, Bandini was becoming talkative and boastful about his sharp practices.

"Perhaps," thought Rubelli, "the Tarpeian rock is not so very far off,—even that taciturn Napoleon I. grew to be a prater before his downfall." As he kept gazing at the Antiquarian, it struck him more and more how the head of the old fraud resembled a skull covered with parchment, and how feeble he looked. Rubelli's heart tingled with the hope that redemption was not far off.

"You have just come from the Hôtel Drouot," said Bandini. "Now, tell me if you have heard anything about the sale? What is the public impression? Did you see many amateurs at the exhibition of the Saccetti Collection?"

"The show-room was filled with amateurs, and it seems to me the collection is favourably judged. Here are the names of some collectors I recognised."

Bandini perused the list with approving satisfaction. Stopping at a name, he said—

"Nilbruck, that blockhead of a baron—such a talker; and he never buys."

"I heard him say that Count Saccetti was an incog.; he had called at his hotel several times, but could never find him in."

Bandini's eyes twinkled.

"Well," he said, "the last day when the exhibition is about to close we will *produce* the Count. Now,

tell me what about the *bande noire*, that gang of outlaws."

The *bande noire* was a kind of nightmare to Bandini. He knew that the members of the clandestine society crowded sale-rooms so as to keep out good bidders. Their sole purpose was to run down objects and buy at low rates.

"But does the *bande noire* really exist?" said Rubelli, wondering, if it did, why Bandini was not the president of such an elect gathering.

"Of course it does, and it will come to my sale in full force. But we must take our measures. By the way, has any one been booked for the rôle of 'Peter Funk'?"

Peter Funk, in auction-room slang, is a person employed to act as apparent purchaser, to run up articles for sale. The system of placing reserves on objects is not always safe—the secret list of the auctioneer might be seen; but no one can tell how many Peters there are in the room, and if they are bidding against you or not.

To find the individuals for the comedy was one of the many branches of the business entrusted to Rubelli. The methodical Bandini enforced two strict rules, which were that the association of sham bidders should be composed of strangers, and possess a good appearance.

Rubelli brought out the list; the number of "Peter Funks" so far obtained was six.

"Two are Englishmen; one, a hotel waiter, a fine-looking fellow."

"A waiter!" the Antiquarian cried. "My order

was to get genteel-looking people. They must have a moneyed air, and look as if they really could afford to buy objects of art."

"Have you ever noticed," Rubelli remarked loftily, "there are princes and dukes who look like waiters, while the polished manners of a waiter often suggest the superiority of grand seigneurs? Now this is the case with the waiter I selected. He's been in the best hotels in Melbourne. Anyway he looks like a duke."

"Go on, go on, Rubelli," said Bandini impatiently; "and the other?"

"The other is an ex-officer of the English army. Why, simply from seeing him put on his gloves one could tell the aristocrat. And then he wears a monocle — English Premier style. I suggested a coronet on his visiting-card, though I am not quite sure if lords indulge in such fancies."

"You must find out the correct form; the auctioneer might ask for his card. Who are the others?"

"Two Germans, one a professor of French from Bohn. His looks would be improved if he would wear gold-mounted eye-glasses. But that's a trifle; it will be easy enough to provide them in the Rue de Rivoli. The other is an artist, a painter."

"Look here, Rubelli, you have a mania for cheap-looking people. A painter, by Jove! I can imagine his crop of hair, his velvet jacket, and his startling cravat."

"Here is his photograph. What do you think of that?"

"The deuce! He looks like Prince Bearstein, one

of my best clients," exclaimed the Antiquarian. "Are you sure he's an artist?"

"Yes, he studied in Munich. His works have been refused at the Salon and other exhibitions, so now——"

"I see—he doesn't live by his brush."

"Oh dear, no; he must be living on hope—there is such hauteur in his way of looking at everything."

"He'll do. Now what about the ladies?"

"Both English: a blonde and a brunette."

"Are they pretty?" Bandini demanded with the smile of an old libertine.

"Yes, very; especially the blonde. They are both very elegant."

"As for that I'll be my own judge. You, Rubelli, are not exactly good authority on elegance. If you were, you wouldn't insist upon wearing an old-fashioned turned-down collar, and a blue suit with that agonising green cravat."

"I like it: it's original; any colours may be blended if of a proper shade." He took up the pen and a catalogue of the sale.

They began to examine the numbers, setting the proposed prices against each important object, and distributing the numbers among the different "Peter Funks."

"Give the majolica to the ladies," observed Bandini, referring to some Faenza and Cafaggiolo plates in the list.

"What about the Sèvres clock?" Rubelli asked when they came to the fine *pendola* that Count Saccetti had sold the Antiquarian.

"Give that to the more elegant, the blonde; the fans and laces and jewels I can decide about to-morrow when I see the ladies. By the by, Rubelli, you'll not lodge them all in the same hotel?"

"Certainly not: they will be in different houses in the Rue Saint Honoré. No one of them knows anything about the others; and each will be here at a different hour."

When it came to the sword of Cece Saccetti, Bandini said, "Give that to your English officer, and put on it a reserve price at fifteen thousand francs. It is a fine weapon, very rare."

"I know it: Monsieur Beraude, the arms collector, spent a long time in examining it. 'Very fine, *prima montatura*,' I heard him say—the Italian phrase, you understand."

"He knew what he was talking about. It is intact from hilt to point of blade. Then Beraude admired the sword, did he? Look here, put the reserve price at twenty thousand instead of fifteen. Monsieur is very capricious; if he likes an object he doesn't mind what he pays."

When the list was filled in and all the reserved prices transferred to a private catalogue, Bandini wiped his forehead, saying—

"What tedious work. I am glad it is finished. Now, Rubelli, it is for you to reap your reward."

"Yes, I have been thinking of that myself. I hope the recompense will be handsome. It ought to be, after all you have made from your plunder."

"Rubelli, look straight at me, *please*, if you can, and

listen. When you speak with me you must change your vocabulary. I have told you this before, and do not let me have to repeat it, *please*."

Rubelli winced and made no reply. He knew the true value of that word "please" on Bandini's lips; it had the force of the *cher ami* of François I<sup>er</sup>, which always preceded the downfall of a favoured courtier. X

Bandini watched the effect of his thrust. Regaining his usual colloquial tone, he observed that ladies made a good show at such a sale as the Saccetti one. Having so many old jewels it would be better perhaps to have three ladies instead of two.

"Why not call in Signora Fanny, Count Saccetti's friend?" Rubelli suggested.

"I know she is here, though I am supposed to ignore the fact," replied Bandini, hiding under his impenetrable face the vexation of not knowing till that moment that Saccetti was not alone. "How does she look?"

"Beautiful. I saw her the other day in the Avenue de l'Opéra. I recognised her at once by her fine air—such a striking figure. She could pass for a Spanish lady, the wife of a hidalgo. The best jewels and the Gobelins might be allotted to her."

"All right, I'll talk to Count Saccetti."

"Speak of the devil and he always appears," muttered Rubelli, seeing that Alberto Saccetti had entered the room just as his name was pronounced.

"One thing more to be considered, Rubelli——"

Saccetti politely started to leave the room.

"Don't go, Count Saccetti," said the Antiquarian, "there are no secrets."

The visitor, dressed with his usual elegance, placed his cane and silk hat on a chair and took a seat near the table. Rubelli looked at him with a critical eye, remarking that the Beau Brummel air was a trifle too conspicuous. The motto of Gavarni, "*L'élégance c'est savoir s'effacer*," hardly applied here. On his side, Saccetti, with his aversion for traders and money-makers and his spendthrift character, was saying to himself, "*Faire de l'argent, c'est le talent de sots*."

Bandini was pondering over the fact that such a splendid animal as Count Saccetti was now completely under the control of a plebeian, a former sexton, and that the beautiful Fanny was an obstacle to his purposes; he must think out the best way of getting rid of so useless a luxury.

"What was I saying, Rubelli?"

"You said there was one thing more to be considered——"

"Oh yes; don't forget to see those fellows of the press. And now, Count Saccetti, I must ask a favour of you. We are in extreme need of a lady to come to the sale and buy in some of the objects,—that is to say, if they don't fetch our price. Would you kindly ask Signora Fanny to help us?"

Saccetti was startled—he supposed that Fanny Delmar's presence in Paris was unknown. He answered coolly—

"I can ask her. But permit me to observe that if she is in the auction-room they might think she is there to buy for me; we have been seen together here."

"But Paris is a large city," said the Antiquarian, not easily abashed. "I must see her to give the required instructions, so I shall be obliged if you'll tell her to call here the morning of the sale."

"Very well," answered Saccetti, "on the morning of the sale I'll bring her here myself."

"No, for heaven's sake, Count, don't think of it. The day of the sale you mustn't show yourself. Rubelli will explain how important it is for you to be invisible on that day. Really, is Miss Fanny so timid? I am an old man, Count," added Bandini debonairly.

Although Saccetti nodded pleasantly he felt uneasy; he had no wish that any one should know of his connection with Bandini.

"Now everything is arranged—no more work for to-night. Go, enjoy Paris. The old man will stay at home."

After they had left Bandini reflected that, when he saw the lovely Fanny alone, he would persuade her to return to the footlights.

"Where do you intend to dine?" Saccetti asked of Rubelli, when they were in the street. "I don't feel like going back to the hotel to dress."

"Well, the place where I am going to-night could hardly be called aristocratic. It's the "Flying Frog" in the Latin quarter,—I go there because I can pick up plenty of information."

"Let us dine together then. You shall be my guest. To-night I feel like feasting *à la bonne franquette*."



## CHAPTER IV.

## THE FLYING FROG.

"I HOPE you won't be shocked," said Rubelli, when the cab stopped before the door of the tavern of the Flying Frog, commonly called *La Boite*.

The entrance was very humble, enough to justify the half-apologetic tone.

"Not at all," Saccetti responded, "I like a change, and know nothing of the haunts in this part of the city. It has rather a primitive look. Perhaps you think my silk hat and frock-coat will make an exotic show here."

"Oh, that's all right; the friends of the *Boite* will think you are one of my clients."

As they walked down a long corridor leading to the restaurant, a babylonian confusion of voices reached their ears. The restaurant was bright and spacious. It had once been a court, but was now covered with a glass roof. The sketches which artists had left on the white walls gave the room a quaint air. Of course, caricatures of the proprietor Michelet, alias "*Hercule en retraite*," predominated; the merci-

less brush of the artists had not spared even his wife. Michelet had formerly been an acrobat, one of that well-known class called "strong men," who show their muscles, and do feats of strength in the streets and *foires* of Paris. On the wall there was to be seen represented, almost every striking act of Michelet's past career. His ludicrous figure in herculean attire was depicted holding in its hand the "Tower Eiffel," or playing dumb-bells with the Arc de Triomphe.

"It is an extremely original-looking place," observed Saccetti, "far more interesting than the over-rated Cabarets de Montmartre."

Michelet was inside the *comptoir* talking with his portly wife. At the sight of Rubelli, accompanied by such a fine-looking gentleman, he went to meet him to do the honours of the house, showing them the way to an empty table, which he quickly prepared himself, and stood waiting the stranger's order, doubtless thinking him some rich victim of Rubelli. Saccetti ordered an elaborate dinner, with the best *Graves* and St Julien that the cellar afforded. In so doing he strengthened the good impression made upon Michelet by his entry.

"Michelet is 'doing himself proud'; he's giving us Baccarat glasses," remarked Rubelli.

"One could hardly be prepared to find so many dishes in a place like this," Saccetti observed, as he looked through the long menu.

"Oh, don't be too credulous, Michelet's customers go in more or less for the *plat du jour*, the Proteus

that appears now with sauce, now with spinach. They say Michelet's *chef* is so clever he can evolve a goose out of a lamb's leg. But the wine is good."

Saccetti made a survey of the different tables. He could see at a glance that the people gathered there were of different characters, most of them being artists and inhabitants of the *quartier*. The noisy room was in a cloud of smoke that gave it a hazy appearance. The cloudy atmosphere suited the place.

"I come here," said Rubelli, "because there is hardly a better spot in Paris to pick up information. It is like taking a peep behind the stage to learn the secret of the make-up."

"What sort of business are they in?"

"Oh, various kinds, but nearly all are in some way connected with the trade of antiques. *La grande duperie*, I call it."

Rubelli had become as much a pessimist as his master.

"Do you see that table over there?" he continued. "Those five or six individuals are artists, intimately connected with antiques."

"I suppose you mean restorers of paintings."

"Not exactly. Take, for instance, that owlsh-looking fellow with round eye-glasses, the one with red hair, who is talking so loud. He is a 'monogrammist.'"

"Mono——what?"

"——grammist. That may sound queer as the name of a profession; but the profession brings a good profit, I can tell you, and demands real merit,

too. Fauvel is a man that makes his living by signing paintings."

"How is that? It doesn't sound like a paying business."

"On the contrary, there's lots of money in it. That fellow has made a minute study of signatures, from Durer, let us say, down to Corot. But that's nothing; he can go farther back. If Adam had painted a picture of the Garden of Eden, I wager this man would know how to sign it; for when a master's signature is wanting to a canvas he supplies it, and so perfectly too, as to mislead the most cunning expert. Would you believe it, there are some collectors who never look at a work, but only at the signature?"

"They must be asses."

"No, they are amateurs, which sometimes means the same thing. I know there are many people who would prefer to buy a counterfeit painting with a signature, than a genuine work of a master who has forgotten to sign his name."

"I wonder that a man so clever in forging signatures isn't tempted to try his skill on a cheque. It would be a more profitable occupation."

"And a quicker way to land at Mazas' prison or *La Santé*—the healthy name of one of the prisons in Paris. Fauvel isn't a cheap fraud, but a first-class monogrammist. He's not only capable of imitating the signature of a certain artist, but he knows in what epoch of his life a painter changed—artists do that often—his style of signing works. He knows all the whims and phases of such changes; for instance

when a painter dropped signing his initial, making his mark with a *sigla*, or beginning to write his name in full. The fellow showed me one of his note-books the other night; you cannot imagine how interesting it was. There were facsimiles of all sorts of signatures, from the most ordinary to the oldest. On the margin of the pages everything was carefully noted down; for example, the *trait* of a painter who invariably signed his name on the architecture of the background or on a tree of the landscape: he even wrote down if the artist's name was written on the right or the left side of the canvas. Let me tell you, though, that this monogrammist is remarkably accomplished in the so-called 'covered signature'; that is, he makes signatures so obliterated that only under a magnifying-glass they become eligible."

"What's the sense in all that? Where is the practical advantage of a blurred name if you have to go to all that bother to find it?" inquired Saccetti.

"Don't you see, when a painting is signed in that way a dealer will take it to a collector, one of those who buy for the signature. He will say, 'Here is a good picture, but unfortunately it is not signed, though the family that intrusted it to me have always considered it to be a Rembrandt. You can see for yourself it does look like the Flemish master. Anyway, I'll leave the painting here and you can study it at your leisure.' When he is gone, to be sure, the amateur will take a magnifying-glass and make a wonderful discovery—you can imagine what follows."

"It looks to me," said Saccetti, "that since I became

a member of the worthy guild of antiques, I have heard very little apart from trickery and fraud. Yet, I'll say again, it is hard for me to solve the riddle why a fellow like that doesn't study the signature of a financier—say, like Morgan. One fraud is as bad as another in principle."

"This subject would lead us into a long discussion worthy of a better brain than mine. But take it for granted, while that fellow lives by forging signatures on paintings, he's square in everything else, and couldn't be persuaded for any amount of money to try his skill on a cheque. You see he considers himself an unique artist and an honourable one. Did you ever think that in this world there is no exact line of demarcation between right and wrong,—perhaps because men, through conventions, have lost the clear perception of good and evil? Go to Trouville and watch those lovely mermaids playing about in their barely-covered nakedness to show off and be admired, yet they are the same maidens who would never dare to compromise their purity, even to tie a shoe without retiring to some secluded place to perform the immodest duty. Did you ever hear about that model posing for the nude before the Ingres school of artists,—how she rushed for her chemise when she saw workmen peeping through the skylight? It is a fact logic doesn't play a great part in the things of this world," concluded the paradoxical Rubelli. "Bah! I stopped long ago troubling myself over right and wrong."

"How can you say it. Do you really think it possible?"

"Well, never mind," replied Rubelli with a peal of laughter, in which a touch of sadness softened the cynicism. "This *Graves* is most excellent, and—have you ever tasted a fresher lobster?"

Rubelli stopped to sip his wine and admire the fine topaz colour, then went on as merrily as before. As for Saccetti, in whose shallow mind ideas were as unstable as words written on quicksand, he soon dismissed any reflections that broke in upon his gaiety.

"The others at the table," Rubelli went on, "are all concerned with the so-called *rafistolage* of antiques. Look at that thin fellow over there, the one with a high collar and bizarre waistcoat; he is a *cacheur* and also a *chercher d'origines*."

"Of course he must be another member of the necromantic business of antiques," remarked Saccetti. "I can't say, though, that I know what *cacheur* means."

"Haven't you ever heard that word? Why, a *cacheur* is a fellow who provides seals for the back of canvases, so as to make them pass for paintings that have belonged to some old collection of repute. His is a business that is rather dying out; few believe in such tricks now. But take my word for it, if all the paintings that have been sold at the *Hôtels des Ventes* with the red seal of Cardinal Fesch—you know that illustrious relative of Napoleon I., and owner of a valuable gallery—had really belonged to the Fesch Collection, all the space of the Louvre Museum would not have been sufficient to contain them. But, as I

told you, it is not a paying business, so the fellow is also a *chercher d'origines*; that is, he makes documents which tend to establish the authenticity or throw higher value on a certain object by proving that it originally belonged to Turenne, Condé, Rochefaucauld. It may be a letter, an inventory of a castle, or a contract he forges; that depends upon the circumstances. I can tell you this is the place to meet unimagined characters!"

Saccetti was becoming indifferent to Rubelli's dissertation on the rogues around them. In spite of its interest, the odd-looking restaurant in the Latin quarter, with its mysterious crowd, had soon wearied him. In his thoughts he was back again, ever now and then, amid the fashionable life of Florence, or recollecting what had passed between himself and his cousin Oddo.

"The cooking of this restaurant is excellent," he remarked, wishing to turn the conversation into a new channel.

"Yes," replied Rubelli; "many of the customers are more set against imitation in diet than in art. There is a colony of cats in the court, but honest Michelet never serves one up *au civet de lièvre*. This wine, by the way, is fine as nectar!"

"It is good; but I was just thinking it had undergone a little doctoring. Let us have some champagne. What kind has Michelet in his cellar—Mumm, Sil-léry, Mœt Chandon? I see by the list he has everything. Let's have a bottle of Monopole."

Rubelli, whose inclination to talk increased as the



contents of the bottle decreased, accepted with enthusiasm. A minute later the herculean thumb of Michelet was letting a gilded cork fly towards the ceiling.

"Nothing like good champagne," said Rubelli, smacking his lips and holding up his glass; "quite mellifluous."

Nothing so brings people together, making them feel friendly and confidential, as good wine. Saccetti and Rubelli proved this in earnest. They had often met in a business way since Saccetti was "one of them," but they had never been intimate before.

Shortly after a second bottle of champagne was brought out, Rubelli began to speak of his past and gave a few pages of his history with more details than he had ever confided to any one before. Saccetti, who knew how to drink in moderation, saw that his companion was getting a trifle too enthusiastic over small things.

"Do you ever get drunk, Rubelli?" he asked, somewhat alarmed at his companion's loquacity, noticing that Rubelli's squinting eyes had grown strangely shiny and his pale face florid.

"I have been, rarely though; and that when my spirits were too high, or I was down with blue devils."

Saccetti listened to Rubelli, who, becoming more and more garrulous, mixed up his Italian with scraps of French, English, and Latin. He learned that Rubelli had not only been a student of painting, but was a linguist and a man of good education,

compelled to leave his studies when, through the death of his father, he was obliged to support an aged mother.

When the name of Gaspero Bandini came to his lips, his face grew haggard; his voice was no more that of the gay sarcastic Rubelli.

"That devil," he mumbled, "ought to be guillotined. I'd pass the coldest night waiting in Place Roquette to see him marry *La Veuve* at daybreak. Beware, Count, he's after you. Look out, better take my advice."

Saccetti had not even time to note Rubelli's pun over the curious nickname Parisians had given the terrible machine; he had the intuition that he was on the point of learning something—some secret about Bandini.

"How is that?" he asked.

Rubelli had, however, regained control of himself, and replied, cleverly evading the question. Count Saccetti refilled his guest's glass. His curiosity had been piqued, and there seemed no other way of opening his companion's mouth. Rubelli was now in a state when one glass calls for another.

An hour later Saccetti and Michelet were assisting Rubelli into a cab. Screaming *Vive la République*, he was determined that the cabman should drive to the Elysée, where he was expected to dine with President Loubet and some American millionaires.

On the way to the hotel, and while the cab was jerking over the stone pavement, Rubelli sang a popular air at the top of his voice. All Saccetti's

efforts to make him talk were useless. To every question he answered with a stupid—

"Eh?—Bandini, eh—*c'est le roi des farceurs.*" Then resumed his loud singing.

Now that the overdose of liquor threatened to destroy the chance of learning secrets, Saccetti repented having incited Rubelli to drink so much.

The cab crossed the Boulevard Saint Germain and ran smoothly on the asphalt pavement. The change of motion affecting Rubelli's mood, he grew sentimental and began to sob. From his broken and disconnected words Saccetti gathered that he was crying about a girl who had forsaken him because of his crooked life.

The name of Bandini came up again in connection with some ugly business that had placed Rubelli at the mercy of his master.

Saccetti could make nothing out clearly. The drunken man was talking of false signatures and forged documents. As an idea struck him he was overcome with terrible uneasiness, and in his desire to know what he meant he took his companion by the arm and shook him with all his strength.

"Rubelli, what are you talking of? Tell me, what do you know about Bandini?"

"Don't kill me, master," his companion whined; "don't—you hurt me."

"What do you know, Rubelli, about a signature?" insisted Saccetti, shaking the man, who was like a rag in his hand.

"Don't, master, he is in your hand. What a fool that Count is—just like me to sign——"

"Rubelli, what's this you're saying?—who has been signing?"

"Why—master, you know, and you—ask me—that theft of Volterra—the——"

"What theft?"

No answer.

Another shake succeeded.

"Don't, please—you hurt me, master. But I'll tell you one thing," Rubelli spoke lower, "the Count will never give into—your scheme—he's too proud—he would go to prison first——"

Saccetti burst into a cold perspiration. The cab ran smoothly on while his companion continued to mutter irrationally.

"*Vin frappé*, a bottle of champagne, *frappé*. I drink to the espousals of the aristocrat. Here, Count Saccetti—your health!"

## CHAPTER V.

## THE HÔTEL DROUOT.

THE Simonetta bust had been catalogued No. 63 for the Saccetti sale; the total number of items being about double, it would come on when the room was full and have the benefit of late arrivals.

Rochefort, an inveterate *habitué* of Hôtels des Ventes, points out that it is of great importance to buyers in what part of the catalogue objects are placed. It is sufficient to say there are people who earn their living by selling at good prices at four in the afternoon what they have bought at low figures at two; a thing easily understood when one considers that at the beginning of the auction the room is almost empty and the sale at the mercy of traders.

A little flattered by the place of honour given Simonetta, and a good deal disappointed that this fact had lessened the possibility of buying the bust, Palmieri took a seat in the room where the sale of the Saccetti Collection had already attracted many people.

Oddo was not surprised that neither his cousin nor Bandini was there. As a rule the owner of a collection is never present at the sale of his own goods, and Bandini knew too well that *his* presence might arouse suspicion.

From the good prices realised on the first objects that came under the hammer, one could predict the sale was bound to have a great success. To give importance nothing had been neglected by the cunning Bandini; even the catalogues were unusually attractive, with the many reproductions of the best objects. But why was it that the bust of Simonetta was not reproduced? Possibly to avoid its being too closely studied.

The sale went on without any remarkable incident. Palmieri waited patiently for No. 63 to come to the front. He noticed that some of the objects were false, others greatly restored, but of this the public appeared grossly ignorant.

A Frenchman, who had been talking to Oddo, said that in his opinion the sale would be a bad one, there being too many amateurs in the room to promise good chances. From this appreciation Oddo concluded that his neighbour must be a dealer.

At his right sat a young English lady, a blonde, rather stiff and pretty in her tailor-made gown. She seemed to have a real craze for majolica; she had bought one or two pieces, and was bidding on every object of that kind. Next to her was a characteristic Anglo-Saxon figure, a gentleman that the French dealer had named *le monsieur qui achète*

*tout*. It was true that although the gentleman in question was not buying everything, as the Frenchman pretended, the greater part of the objects were adjudged to him.

Real excitement commenced when the Sèvres clock was offered. A pang of bitterness seized Oddo when he saw the old clock on the ignominious pedestal. There were so many reminiscences attached to lot No. 37. How well he recollected when he and Alberto were boys together waiting in the great hall of the palace to hear its chimes and the music playing a *gavotte*. Apart from his troubled thoughts his heart rebelled over the fate of one of these homeless Penates of the Saccetti family, about to be brutally disputed by an unfeeling crowd.

Without knowing why, Oddo felt glad when the English lady was no longer a contestant. Bids were being offered in rapid succession. The Sèvres piece was about to fall into the hands of a well-known collector of clocks, when another competitor raised the price. It was *le monsieur qui achète tout*, who had joined in the clamour with the determination of carrying off the prize.

"I wonder if he will be an adversary?" Oddo asked himself. "If so, my chance is hopeless. Who can fight against such an obdurate opponent!"

"Didn't I tell you there'd be no chance to buy anything?" said the Frenchman to Oddo, when he saw the Sèvres clock join the acquisition of the wholesale buyer. "He must be going to set up a shop."

"Do you know him? Who is he?" Palmieri asked.

"*Ma foi*, a gentleman arrived this morning from London. *C'est an idiot* ; he buys everything, especially if he sees other people want it. No use in trying to compete with him, he outbids everybody."

That he was a formidable adversary was proved when he contested with a celebrated collector of arms for the sword of Cece Saccetti, winning the contest with the fancy price of thirty thousand francs.

"*C'est cher*, a crazy price," remarked the Frenchman.

There was a discussion over the bidding of No. 62, which ended in the object being resold. To Palmieri the incident, that lengthened his suspense, lasted an eternity.

"No. 63," called out the auctioneer.

The bust of Simonetta was placed on the table. There was a slight murmur of admiration ; Oddo's heart leaped to his throat. The auctioneer gave a satisfied glance at the bust, then read the paragraph from the catalogue which attributed the work to Desiderio da Settignano.

The *expert* spoke afterwards, putting in relief the high merit of the bust, of the best period of fifteenth century art.

Palmieri listened as if in a dream. In the impulse of the moment he felt like facing the auctioneer and crying out, "You are a liar!—I made it!" But the temptation was smothered by the thought of an infuriated crowd rushing at him and shouting, "*Farceur*," as he was hustled out of the room for a lunatic. The experience would not be new. Had it not happened to Gavarni in an auction-room at Bordeaux, when he



protested against some pictures attributed to his brush?

"An offer, messieurs," said the auctioneer.

From the first offer of two thousand francs the price rose rapidly to ten thousand. At this point there was a slight pause. Then Oddo joined the fray. The bidding became animated again, only to reach another suspense, after which Palmieri, to his surprise, saw the bust of Simonetta waiting a higher bid than the twenty thousand francs already offered.

"Twenty thousand," repeated the auctioneer, waving the hammer in the air.

"Twenty thousand."

Palmieri, who had already passed the price to which he had limited himself, timidly hazarded the smallest bid allowed on the big sum.

"You are going to pay a crazy price," said the Frenchman warningly. "*Il ne faut pas s'emballer.*"

But Oddo could only see the face of Simonetta,—all the rest was in a haze. For a moment he hoped and feared that the hammer would fall,—but another offer started the contest again, and three or four more bidders joined it. Palmieri lost all control over himself, making bids with a decisive nod: he pushed on regardless of every other competitor until he reached the round sum of forty thousand francs. As he heard his bid resound in the stillness of the room he felt again the terror of the hammer-stroke.

The "Britisher"—as the Frenchman near Oddo styled the greedy buyer—who had watched the contest with apparent indifference, burst out—

"Fifty thousand."

Palmieri felt desperately relieved.

However, before throwing up the sponge, he bent over to his outbidder and whispered something.

"Sit down, sir; that is strictly against the law," interrupted the auctioneer.

Palmieri dropped back into his place; but his antagonist must have comprehended what had been whispered, for he smiled with contempt, and went on gaily bidding against another rival, who, according to the assertion of the Frenchman, was a "German professor," director of some museum.

It was now a duel between two giants, both coolly heaping money on the bust in perfect unconcern of the "Oh, oh's" of the crowd, and the myriad of eyes fixed upon them.

When the bust reached the respectable sum of one hundred thousand there was a shuffling of feet—the curious enthusiastic homage of the auction-room.

"*Ils sont fous*," commented the Frenchman.

"A hundred thousand," cried the auctioneer.

"A hundred thousand," repeated the *crieur*.

"*A la bonne heure*," said the *expert*, "only a hundred thousand for a Desiderio da Settignano!"

Oddo sat as one dazed, with a choking pressure at his throat, and the shivering chill of fever stealing over him. Deadly pale he tried to rise, but felt himself nailed to the chair.

The Frenchman looked at him.

"Are you not well, sir," he asked, "*ça vous donne de l'émotion?*"

His answer was not audible. The Frenchman went on—

“You had a narrow escape, sir; even your offer of forty thousand was too much.”

The battle waged between the giants: the two slowly fought their way up until one hundred and forty-five thousand was reached by the German professor.

There was a religious silence in the room.

The spectators of the duel looked in suspense at the opponent, who sat fidgeting with his pencil.

“*Le mot, messieurs?*” said the auctioneer, preparing to give a deciding stroke.

The “Britisher” bent his head in approbation; the auctioneer shouted in triumph—

“One hundred and fifty thousand.”

Turning to the German he cried—

“*Encore?*”

“One hundred and fifty thousand,” said the *expert*, and the *crieur* repeated the sum wildly.

It was the highest price realised in the day.

The German professor was no longer in the mood to fight the stubborn Croesus. He shook his head and thrust his nose into the catalogue. The auctioneer reiterated three or four times, “One hundred and fifty thousand.” The hammer fell, and the Anglo-Saxon held the field.

With a gigantic effort Oddo got up and hurried out into the fresh air.

## CHAPTER VI.

## FROM SCYLLA TO CHARYBDIS.

LIKE most people who live alone and apart from the world, Gaspero Bandini was inclined to soliloquy.

His solitary speculations did not aim at solving problems of an abstract kind, nor did he indulge in them out of æsthetic consideration of Art. For such absurdities—to use Bandini's definition—there was no lobe in his brain. Ideas of fraud were what predominated, and so well pondered and so highly finished too were they, that when he put them into operation nothing was wanting.

The day after the sale, when Gaspero Bandini had collected the handsome profit, and was congratulating himself on having once more duped the world, he recognised that some trifling things in his arrangements had not gone as he had willed them.

First of all, Rubelli that morning had been not only impertinent but even aggressively exacting: he demanded a share in the booty besides the five hundred francs gratuity received for extra work. Rubelli claimed to have pushed the sale of the

Simonetta bust to the bid of one hundred and forty-five thousand francs by making a motion to the German professor—who, by the way, with his imposing look, suggested the director of a German museum, and proved to be the most clever of the Peter Funks—to bid higher than the reserve price of one hundred thousand francs that had been fixed by Bandini.

“That fool,” the Antiquarian said to himself, “perhaps expected all the surplus over the reserve price, without calculating that had the professor from Bohn not been bidding against a determined lunatic the bust might have remained on my hands. Then, of course, I should have been obliged to pay the high percentage to the Hôtel des Ventes. Rubelli needs a lesson in moderation; when we get back to Florence I must sharpen his memory. I’ll drop a word or two, and he’ll remember his position.”

There was another problem to be solved. Why had Fanny Delmar not come to see him the day of the sale, as had been arranged?

His plan for sending Fanny Delmar back to Italy had put him to some expense and trouble. It proved a useless move now, since the ballet girl had not put in an appearance. But why had she not come?

Noticing that Rubelli had carelessly placed ‘Le Bottin’—the bulky directory of Paris—on the delicate case that held the Reliquary, and fearing that the weight might damage the fine leather box, Bandini got up and removed the book.

Just then Antonio entered to tell his master there was a lady asking for him.

"Show her in," said the Antiquarian, sitting down again at his desk.

Bandini was not prepared to see such an elegant Parisian figure. When the lady removed her veil, and the full light from the window fell on her face, he exclaimed—

"Why, Amalia! You here?"

"Yes, your victim is here, as you see."

"Now, don't begin the old story so soon. What are you doing in Paris? What can I do for you?"

"I came here to tell you that I do *not* wish you to come between Count Saccetti and me," was the sharp answer. "This is the reason, and nothing else. I didn't go to your auction—I don't want to have anything to do with you. Oh! if Count Saccetti knew you as well as I do——"

"Now, Amalia—or Fanny Delmar, one or both, or whichever you like the best—I am delighted to see you; but old friends as we are, let us speak plainly. What you ask is unreasonable. How beautiful you have grown! Fine feathers make fine birds. Who'd ever suspect that Fanny Delmar was my Amalia?"

"Shut up," said the woman, "and tell me what you are up to now."

"It's this: I want you to leave the Count and go back to Italy immediately."

"We'll see about that."

Fanny Delmar happened to glance at the table where the box with the Reliquary had been laid. At the sight she stepped back and began to scream—

"Oh, it was you, then—thief—assassin!"

"Now, Amalia, don't excite yourself," said the Antiquarian calmly. "I am in no mood to listen to screeching women. Such insolence annoys me even when it comes from two pretty lips like yours."

"Hyena—assassin! So it was you that stole the casket from our church, and had my poor father accused—you that killed him!"

"Do be quiet, Amalia. I bought that Reliquary from—somebody. I remember that your father was tried and acquitted. If he is dead now, why, everybody is bound to die one day or another. To be a sexton of a church doesn't mean being able to bargain with eternity."

"Thief—pirate!" The girl began to sob.

Then Bandini's old soft persuasive voice oozed out—

"Don't cry, my dear, don't cry. Be reasonable. It is to serve both you and the Count that——"

But the girl was not to be conciliated.

"Thief! I am going to the Italian Embassy to accuse you."

If the Antiquarian was afraid, he dissembled extremely well. Taking her by the arm he broke out—

"So that would be your game, my lady—to denounce me? You little fool! If I could make you understand that I am trying to save the Count, you would go back to Italy and—wait for him."

"You old devil! I don't believe a word of it."

"Old devil! That is indeed the first compliment you have paid me since you entered the room,—though I am not conceited enough to think I deserve it. Sit

down, Amalia; take this comfortable chair, and rest till you are a trifle more composed."

The Antiquarian took a paper out of a box and showed it to Fanny.

"Look here, Amalia; before being my accuser, see who sold me the Reliquary. Look well. Do you know this signature?"

"Alberto Saccetti!"

"Yes, I bought it of him. This paper not only certifies that he sold it to me, but that it belonged to the chapel of his family. If you make any noise over this affair, *he* will pay dearly for it—not I."

For the first time Fanny Delmar was silenced. She took the offered seat, and appeared disposed to listen.

"Now, Amalia, hear what I have to say."

Fanny Delmar, sitting motionless like a statue, listened with attentive ear to the Antiquarian's words. He spoke slowly and with earnest voice, explaining how Count Saccetti was exposed to danger, and how such risk would be aggravated by the fact that Amalia Rossi, the daughter of the former sexton of the church of Volterra, was his companion.

"The Reliquary cannot be restored to its rightful place—that's impossible. Look here, Amalia, I'm anxious to save the Count—and so are you. Take my advice—go back to Florence. When the affair has blown over I believe he'll marry you. Who knows? It may be a couple of months before everything is perfectly safe. But have patience, my dear. Beside,



you don't want the Count to know of our old acquaintance."

Miss Delmar wiped from her cheek a lonely tear, automatically adjusted a stray lock of hair which she spied as she glanced in the mirror.

Bandini noticed the trifling incident.

"Amalia," he said, "there's no need for gloomy looks. Cheer up! Of course I don't expect you to make the sacrifice for nothing. Don't you know, Amalia, that the smiles of a pretty woman are the tears of the purse? Antonio will accompany you to the station."

Hardly a quarter of an hour had elapsed after Fanny Delmar's departure when Bandini thought he heard steps on the staircase.

"Who's there?" he asked.

No answer came, yet some one had softly crept up the staircase and was now peeping through a small aperture of the door.

"Antonio?" called the Antiquarian, thinking some unforeseen obstacle had brought him back from the station.

"Antonio?"

"He is not here. But he was kind enough to leave the door open for me."

The man who spoke these words while entering the room was a stranger to the Antiquarian. His face bore traces of misery and hardship; his ragged clothes proved them. It was one of those beings that make one think of the Morgue and Criminal Court both at

one time—a fear-inspiring figure, such as one might see at night in barricades and Paris *bagarres*.

“What do you want here?” asked Bandini, his hand moving toward the drawer of his desk.

The man noticed the act. Springing like a panther, he seized the hand that still grasped the key, and held it there as in a vice.

“Not so fast. Leave the ‘barker’ inside the box. No noise,—we’re going to have a chat.”

“Let me alone. Who are you?”

“You don’t recognise your old comrade? Has time and misery changed me so much?”

“Giovanni!—Let go my hand, you hurt me.”

“I am younger and stronger, you see. I haven’t been wasting energy in luxury.”

The man showed exultation that he could with his left hand nail his victim at his mercy, while with the other caress a large clasp-knife in the gape of his pocket.

“Let me alone, and get out. I have an engagement.”

“We must talk first. No dodging,—don’t I know your tricks? Why, I could wring your neck as easily as I used to wring the necks of those Montegalli bantams. But I came here on business, not to dawdle. Let me have that ‘barker.’”

“Free my hand and I’ll give you the key.”

“No; let us get it together like old pals.”

The man opened the drawer, still holding the petrified wrist of the Antiquarian, and took out a big revolver.

“Gosh! a Colt; there’s an extravagance for you!

I remember you always liked dainty things. Don't look unpleasant. Take that easy-chair in the corner and—smile. Now that the door is fastened and the viper has lost its teeth, let us go on with our talk. Afraid? I shan't shoot. I don't go in for noisy tools. Look, this is my quiet friend." Flourishing a long pocket-knife, he pressed the spring and flashed it open.

The Antiquarian fixed his eyes on the pointed blade.

"What can I do for you, Giovanni?" he asked.

His unsteady voice showed that he was at bay with a desperado.

"I see you are disposed to be reasonable." Then eyeing him, "You have grown old, Gaspero. I can remember when you were a fine-looking chap. If it wasn't for those foxy eyes and that hawk-nose of yours I wouldn't have recognised you. Over thirty years; that's time enough to change."

"Be quick; tell me what you want. Some one might come at any moment."

"That's all the same to me. It wouldn't change the situation; the door is locked. If any one comes, just say you are busy talking with a gentleman."

"What do you want?"

"Fifty thousand; only fifty thousand, Gaspero."

"Good God! I haven't that much."

"Don't you know how much you have in the *Crédit Libre*? I can tell you to a penny. One of them bank fellows let it out."

"Look here; how much do you really want?"

"Well, thinking it over business-like, it might be safer to leave a couple of thousand to your credit. You can draw the cheque for the rest right here."

"O God! that means ruination—penury."

"What do I care? Besides, I don't believe it. So be quick."

"Why do you come to me? I don't owe you anything," said the Antiquarian, in desperate effort to make an impression.

"Not owe me anything? Didn't I help you? You haven't forgotten that awful night after the burial, when you were in the chapel, and I out fooling with that white dog of yours—playing at being the ghost of my poor master. God! could I ever forget that rattling storm—wind, rain, hail, the very devil let loose; and I there in it, while you were in the vaults saying your paternosters with the gems, and stripping the mummies of the Tosinghi? And what did I get?"

"Giovanni, did you say fifty thousand? You don't mean it."

"Haven't I told you I would leave a couple of thousand? Not, though, because I feel soft. Look at me. Do you think it too much? You know that I could claim the whole, and more."

"I won't give up the money."

"Yes, you will, in a jiffy. I've been talking too much. Go to the desk and fill out the cheque."

Covered by the revolver, Bandini went to his desk and drew forth his cheque-book. He saw the determined will of a cut-throat ready to face the worst.

After all, there was the possibility that the payment of the cheque might be stopped, if ever he got from out the clutches of the desperate man.

"Hold up, Gaspero. I've been thinking it over. Make out two cheques; big figures look suspicious."

The two cheques filled out, the Italian took them from the trembling hand of the Antiquarian.

"What are you going to do now?" asked his frightened victim.

"Don't be afraid, I'm only calling a friend." He gave three taps on the glass of the window. "You don't suppose I am in the habit of visiting banks in rags? It won't take long anyway."

A well-dressed man came to the door, took the cheques, and politely asked Bandini to supply some necessary formalities that the Antiquarian had omitted; after which he disappeared.

"That's the president of our trust company. Sit down and have a talk till he comes back. I see you have some fine objects about you, Gaspero. I remember you were a regular magpie for such things. You know what you're about. I thought that was all rubbish you were taking out of the church. Oh, I see you have Tuscan cigars, dear old *toscani*; let's have a smoke while we talk over old times."

Bandini sat in a corner, sulky and half-paralysed with fear. For once in his life he had been beaten.

His former assistant grew communicative. He told about his vagrant life, the different countries he had adopted since the one he had lost. Then he indulged in some frivolities. Looking at Bandini's bald head

suggested to him an infallible method for growing hair.

"You ought to be ashamed of such robbery," broke out Bandini.

"Yes, I am ashamed. Did you ever have that feeling, Gaspero,—you who taught me to rob and do worse? I was an honest countryman before you crossed my path. Do you think, poor devil that I am, I have forgotten how I waited in the dark to give that push to my poor master, Bostico, just to please Count Florestano—and you? I was to be rich, never know hunger—ha, ha!—nor thirst, nor want for anything. You damned rascal! but for you I might now be an honest man, happy in my own country, with a home, with my family, instead of being what I am, a vagabond and a criminal. It takes you to tell me what I am and what I ought to be."

Bandini kept quiet, hypnotised by the sight of the six-shooter and the knife bulging from the baggy pocket of the fearless thief.

Only a short time elapsed before the man returned, accompanied by another colleague.

"Everything went well," he said, "we got it."

"I'll keep this bull-dog, Gaspero, as a souvenir," said Giovanni. "Since the operation went off so handsomely, we'll let you free. Gaggling is stage rot, but if you make even as much noise as a mouse, it will be your last squeak."

Bandini, left alone, remained thunderstruck for some minutes, so unexpectedly, so rapidly had the "operation" been performed.

"What a fortunate thing I didn't place all the money in the bank," was his first thought.

When Antonio came in, Bandini questioned—

"Why did you leave the door ajar?"

"I closed it, sir. It was you who left the latchkey in the door. Here it is."

Bandini, taking the key, saw that it was neither his nor Antonio's.

## CHAPTER VII.

## AT BAY.

“‘To insure peace, be prepared for war,’ was the saying of that wise old priest of the church of Montegalli who was so fond of Latin quotations: I’ve forgotten how it runs in Latin. At all events the Count never had a better friend. Yet if——”

The Antiquarian tapped his long bony fingers on a package of letters he had been looking over.

“The Count will be here at nine,” he said, with a glance at the clock, then indifferently drew from out the bundle a letter yellow with age, so old and creased as hardly to hang together. He held it delicately between his fingers while he unfolded it, conscious of its readiness to fall in pieces. As he read the endearing words a cynic smile crisped his lips. He looked again at the signature, “Your own Oretta.” “What fools men are,” he said aloud; “but some are dead—dead before their time—through women.”

A foolish French clock on the mantelpiece had gasped nine times, when Count Alberto Saccetti, punctual to his rendezvous, entered the room.



The Antiquarian looked at the young Count, and thought he appeared grave and a trifle preoccupied.

"I am glad to see you, Count Saccetti,—precise to the minute; bravo! Now that the drudgery of business is over, let us have a nice quiet talk."

Saccetti seated himself in front of Bandini, while the latter went on talking. He spoke of the sale and its great success, declaring his intention of recognising what Count Saccetti had done for him. His tone was vague; he was evidently thinking of something else. At moments he stuttered as if trying to drag on a useless conversation.

Saccetti was wary; so perhaps the Antiquarian. Both thought of Fanny Delmar, but neither spoke her name.

Bandini, unable to formulate his project, picked up a catalogue from the table, looked over it aimlessly, then, after a few moments of hesitation, he said—

"Count Saccetti, I want to ask you a question—have you ever had the idea of getting married?"

"Many times," answered Saccetti, assuming a joking tone; "certainly every time I lost heavily at the club I went to bed dreaming of a rich wife."

Another pause, and Bandini took out a large photograph from an envelope lying in front of him and handed it to the Count, saying—

"Here is a rich lady—a great heiress,—what do you think of her?"

The picture showed a short fat girl, with a vulgar thick neck, who had all appearance of a servant showily dressed. Her hair, parted *à la Cléo de Mérode*

—for the occasion evidently—made her look still more ridiculous on the insignificant square of cardboard. There was apparently all that money could pay for and vulgarity attain. Jewels and laces in profusion were there, which only heightened the contrast between the finery of the attire and the coarseness of the face.

“Marry such a creature,” thought Saccetti; “it would take centuries to wipe out the blot.”

“She is thoroughly fitted for any position,” said the Antiquarian proudly.

“Who is she?” Saccetti asked evasively, as a glimmer of truth struck him.

“I must know first what you think of her.”

Count Saccetti began to shift about. A vague idea that he had seen the living representative of the photograph driving in Florence with some questionable women under Bandini’s patronage annoyed him. This thought, together with the disconnected but not incoherent words spoken by Rubelli, made him suppose there was some hidden intention in the affair. If the plebeian Bandini meant to pass on to him one of his *cocottes*, he would learn once and for ever who Alberto Saccetti was. The idea that Bandini could even conceive of such a thing offended him. He came very near telling him that for a man of the Saccetti caste there was a limit to shame. Think of the refusal of the old reprobate occupying the place next to that of his mother!

He endeavoured to discourage the obstinate besieger by saying—

"After I stopped gambling I came to the conclusion that the life of a bachelor was the one for me."

"Pray don't joke, Count Saccetti; I'm in dead earnest. I've set my mind upon seeing you married. A man in your position ought to marry. It would be greatly to your advantage."

The face of the Antiquarian was stern, and reminded Saccetti of the stony expression he had noticed when calling for the first time at the house of Via Valfonda.

A clever sparring succeeded. The Antiquarian occasionally let his opponent feel the iron grip under his would-be polished manner. Saccetti shrewdly dodged the gauntlet. One of the two was very likely to lose his temper. The Antiquarian was the first to use a risky phrase.

"Count Saccetti," he said, "I don't follow you in your objections. You talk as if the girl were not good enough for you."

"She is not," said Saccetti bluntly, feeling the blood beat in his temples, "and you ought to know it."

The Antiquarian turned pale. In a calmer mood Saccetti would have avoided this imprudence; but the idea that the Antiquarian dared to believe a Count Saccetti would accept such a proposition had stirred his pride. He was up and ready to fight for the honour of his name.

Bandini observed with some emphasis that he failed to see why a ruined nobleman couldn't marry a rich plebeian. Saccetti would not be the first one.

"Where is the shame of such a marriage?" he said.

"Tell me ; I fail to see it. Excuse me, Count Saccetti, but the reasoning of an aristocrat must be different from that of a plebeian. You joined my scheme ; you lent your noble name to back — what shall I call it — 'plebeian operations,' and not exactly stainless : now you stop half-way when it is a question of a handsome marriage,—one of those money-marriages of which your class is so fond. Come, Count Saccetti, the whole thing is inconsistent."

"It may appear illogical to you," answered Saccetti, with a firm accent in his voice that the Antiquarian could not mistake ; "but sometimes aristocrats, as you like to call us, know where to draw the line. I can never blush enough at my association with filthy schemes. I can never bring dishonour upon my descendants by such a marriage. Understand once and for ever, Mr Bandini, I'll never marry that show-case of jewelry."

"Be careful, Count Saccetti," answered his persecutor with threatening insinuation ; "I have counted upon this marriage. It was my plan when I associated you with me in my *filthy* schemes. You promised at that time to comply with every wish of mine. Reflect well ; don't throw away a good chance. Count Saccetti, I entreat you for the last time."

Could a cat speak while playing and teasing a mouse to death, it might take Bandini's tone. He felt the man was in his clutches and was bound to yield. Naturally, he would have preferred handling his noble victim with a velvet glove. But now that the aristocrat had wounded him, he enjoyed humbling

the Count's pride before attaining his end by persuasion or by force.

Saccetti had made no reply ; he remained obstinately silent.

"Count Saccetti, you will at least admit that you owe me a reason."

Saccetti, determined to put an end to the controversy, broke out—

"You must take me for a fool. Do you think I am blind, that I don't know who that girl is? No, it is not to be thought of—not for a second. No dishonest woman has ever yet entered the Saccetti family, and, bad as I am, I'll not be the first to stain the name in that way."

The Antiquarian clasped the paper-knife in his hand with twice the necessary strength, then throwing it on the table, burst into a peal of sarcastic laughter.

"*O perdio!* Count Saccetti, you are a wonder in this wicked century ; I've never known such a thing as an honest woman in all my life, and I can tell you that I have known many women. Let me tell you that your adorable Fanny Delmar, born Amalia Rossi, became the soiled dove of Gaspero Bandini years ago. It is just like you to swear to the chastity of all your women from the bottom to the top of your genealogical tree. So in the Saccetti family," he nodded dryly, "all pure. Not to go further back, you are ready, no doubt, to swear by your great-grandmother and her sisters, cousin and aunt. Of course, as for your mother——"

"Enough," interrupted Saccetti. "I forbid you to

mention my mother. She was a saint. And you dare to offer this clot of dirt to take her place?" And picking up the photograph he threw it in Bandini's face.

"It is gratifying to know that somebody still believes in miracles and saints. Florestano Saccetti, your father, might have been of different opinion——"

"Liar—*ladro*—*pezzo d'Inferno*!"

"Don't waste such titles, noble Count Saccetti, because I proposed you to marry my daughter. Save them for your father, who was an assassin, and your mother——"

Bandini had no chance to finish his invective. Count Saccetti, furiously springing up, grasped the throat of his enemy. The Antiquarian struggled feebly. The long bony hands of the old man frantically fingered the air; then his body collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Saccetti gave a hasty glance at the motionless form, and stole out into the street.

At the foot of the staircase he imagined he heard a voice calling "Antonio!"

"It is not possible," he said; "I felt his soul passing through my grasp."

**PART THIRD**  
**NEW YORK**





## CHAPTER I.

### TERRA INCOGNITA.

"SHOULD a poet and a scientist land together in New York, the poet might lose his inspiration and cease to be a poet, while the latter, confronted by such a rhapsody of mechanical wonders, might turn lyric."

Palmieri read over again the sentence that closed his long letter to Helen Grahame.

"How absurd of me," he mused. "It is hardly four hours since I landed. What do I know about New York? I might describe the wooden barrack at the pier, where I spent two disagreeable hours under the paternal eyes of the custom-house officials—oh, those eyes of theirs! (how did Juno come to slight such argus-eyes when she decorated the tail of her peacock?) I might give Helen my impression of the wall-paper of my room here at the Hotel Waldorf—a rather inspiring pattern composed of Easter lilies in serpent-like postures. I might tell her that looking from my window—my room is No. 1463 on the fourteenth floor—through a

purplish haze, somewhat inky since the sun went down, I see a city in a yawning abyss between the clouds. That's all I can say about New York—enough, though, for an ingenious tourist to fill a good-sized book."

The letter Palmieri had been re-reading was the third attempt at an epistle long meditated upon during his voyage.

Tearing the letter to pieces, he threw it into the waste-paper basket to keep company with the others.

"Alberto is right," he said; "to write a decent love-letter one ought not to be in love."

Sitting aimlessly before the blank piece of paper, Oddo asked himself why was it, now that he was so near Helen, he had lost the courage he had for writing her when on the other side of the ocean.

"It may be," he said in a self-consoling tone, "that the elaborate gold monogram of this hotel stationery is in my way."

He fell to dreaming about Helen,—so near him—he would see her in a few hours.

As he sailed the smooth waters of thoughts of Helen's love, a rock unexpectedly rose up before him in the shape of Mr Grahame. He fancied Helen's father one of those square-jawed wilful tyrants of a family who, attempting to rule the happiness of its members, make each one wretched.

"I'll face the bull-dog anyway," he concluded.

The telephone began ringing.

"Is that Mr Wade?" Oddo asked, recognising the voice through the vibrating disc of the instrument.

A minute later Palmieri, stepping out of the lift, met Wade.

"Well, I declare! This is the best move you ever made," the American said, as he gave him a hearty handshake.

"You received my cable?"

"Yes, but I'm sorry to say, too late to come down to the pier."

"You will dine with me, I hope?"

"On the contrary, I mean to take you to my house. We'll have a quiet talk over the good old times. There is too much noise in that palm-room."

"We can go to another room."

"No, you are my guest to-night."

"Thank you; I will be delighted to spend my first evening with you."

"What do you think of the Waldorf-Astoria?" said Wade, as they walked down the hall. "I suppose you'll tell me there is too much of everything. Let me say, though, in New York you'll find quantity supersedes quality. This hotel, you see, has to suit the taste of its various patrons. It's very much like those gay women on the boulevards who, by smiling at everybody, have no expression left."

"It is an extraordinary building," Palmieri answered, "though I confess that I have hardly seen it."

"Oh, you're looking down the corridor at those gorgeous dresses—I mean ladies. That is called the peacock hall, a competition place, where ladies vie with each other. You see that dark mass further down? It's the gentlemen. Some evening when you

have nothing else to do, you can amuse yourself studying that museum of the *genus homo*."

As the carriage passed Broadway, Palmieri saw in the dim light of Hanover Square an over-sized gentleman, really of heroic proportions, coolly sitting in a comfortable arm-chair, as if waiting for the man round the corner to come and shine his boots.

"I see *you* have statues too," Palmieri observed, as they passed near the black mass. His bantering tone reminded Wade how mercilessly he had criticised the monuments of modern Italy.

"Yes, unfortunately we have. There is a universal epidemic of them, against which, I guess, we have no prophylactic. Our great men are fated to be congealed for ever in attitudes of disjointed marionettes. They are at least ornamental when transformed into grotesque shapes by snow, and certainly useful for birds to do their billing and cooing on. That travesty in bronze you've just seen is meant for our great journalist, Horace Greeley."

The carriage was going at a good speed. From the glare of Broadway it turned into the semi-obscurity of Madison Square, then again into the light of Fifth Avenue.

Wade lived in one of the Colonial houses of Washington Square.

Oddo was impatient to hear news of Helen, but he did not wish Wade to suspect the reason of his coming to America. He was waiting a chance to ask about her when the carriage stopped abruptly.

"Here we are," said Wade.

On entering the house one could see at once that the master was a man of taste. The hall was white, and simple with stucco decorations and Ionic pillars. On each side of the entrance there were marble bas-reliefs representing mythologic subjects. Wade, noticing Palmieri looking around him while he divested himself of his overcoat, said—

"Now, Mr Palmieri, please don't notice that rubbish. I bought those things long ago when I was younger, and possessed more enthusiasm than money. Some day I'll inflict upon you the inspection of my little art family. Your first night in America shall be spared the punishment. I promise that I am not going to talk antiques either. My collection is on the floor above, and in a good light, too. I don't show my objects in an electric glare as many do. They seem to think that the yellow light, which they call subdued, adds charm to the effect. It's cheap mysticism to exhibit a Raphael in the irony of a shrine, with a bulb of light stuck below. But I promised not to speak a word about antiques to-night."

When they were seated at table Palmieri asked with an effort of carelessness—

"By the way, how are Mr Grahame and his family?"

"Grahame isn't here, you know. I thought you had heard about their trouble."

"No, I started off for America rather suddenly. I was about to write to—Mrs Grahame when you called at the hotel."

"They are in mourning for the death of Paul Grahame, who died abroad. Grahame is gone to Paris to bring his brother's body back."

"I had not heard of it, or I should have written to Mrs Grahame. I must have been in Paris when it happened."

"Very likely. Well, Paul's death is a great blow to his brother. Besides, he was, as I told you, his adviser in art purchases." Then after a moment he added, "Now, Palmieri, will you pardon me if I ask a question—perhaps an impertinent one? You know I'm a good friend of yours. You have come to New York for Helen Grahame?"

The face his guest drew might be expressed by an interrogation point; but he could not deny the fact.

"Very well," said Wade, happy to have scored his first point. "Helen of course fell in love with you over there. 'Love at first sight,' I suppose they call it."

"I haven't dared to hope that much," Oddo answered, "but I certainly love her."

"Then take the advice of an old friend of the Grahame family. I've observed Helen's eyes when your name has been mentioned, and can guess pretty well the rest. Her father suspects nothing: such things, though, never escape the keen eye of a mother—I don't think you have anything to fear there. Mrs Grahame always speaks highly of you. As for Grahame himself—that's another question: he's a pretty hard customer to tackle. Obstinacy is what has brought him his financial success, and obstinacy

is the main feature of his character. You are an Italian, and of course a stranger."

"And a possible fortune-hunter."

"That's about the size of it. Anyway, I am on your side, and am going to help you."

"Thank you very much, Mr Wade; you are very kind," Palmieri said gratefully.

"It is certainly a new business for me," Wade went on good-naturedly; "but when I got your cable from Nantucket I knew what was the trouble, and made my plans accordingly. Now, if you agree to follow my directions, we'll come out ahead and succeed. However, you must do exactly as I tell you."

"I couldn't ask anything better, Mr Wade. Let me confess that the fear my intention might be misunderstood kept me back all this time. But in the end I came, as you see."

"And Helen didn't encourage you?" questioned Wade. "Grahame noticed letters coming with a foreign stamp, but he doesn't seem to have attached much importance to the fact. To avoid suspicion, though, wouldn't it be better for you to leave town to-morrow, run to the station and catch the first train that leaves New York? You said you were going to take a trip to see something of our great country. Take it while Grahame is away. You had better be playing the tourist for a couple of weeks, and then when he comes back I'll do the rest. I'll invite him to meet you here at my house, where you can be seen—to use your own phrase about art objects—in the best light."

Oddo laughed.

"I am in your hands, Mr Wade. Give me your instructions and I will follow them to the letter. I suppose I must go to-morrow. Mightn't I drop a line to Miss Grahame?"

"Oh, that would spoil everything! Don't you see, when Grahame comes back, she would have to let him know that you were here and had written to her. That might arouse suspicion. Even Helen mustn't know you are here. How lucky it is you didn't tell her you were coming."

"Then I can't write?"

"No; first you must get on the right side of Grahame. He is a queer fellow. In many ways he's different from other men. For instance, he may come home with the body of his brother, bury it with all due honours, and afterwards go on the same as though nothing had happened. I am certain he'll invite his friends to see his new purchases, as if Paul were alive and there among them. After all, isn't that the best way to take things? Now let me make you out your tour. If I were you I'd take the train that goes to Buffalo—you must see Niagara Falls. Up the Hudson the scenery is simply grand—nothing like it in the world. The line runs miles along the river."

Wade, railway guide in hand, traced out the trip, giving full directions.

The following morning Oddo Palmieri started off on the trip very much against his inclinations.

After a week of exile he began to send off a suc-



cession of telegrams to Wade to know when he might be released from purgatory. But Wade remained inflexible.

However, at last at Boston, on entering the Hotel Touraine one evening, a wire was handed him. It read, "Come, everything ready.—WADE."

## CHAPTER II.

## A RIVERSIDE CALL.

"*Veni, vidi, vici.* I never dreamt I could so easily win the grace of *le père Grahame.*"

Even Wade had whispered to Palmieri in his expressive if not choicest language, "You lucky dog."

While on his way to call on the Grahame family with his credential *en règle*, Palmieri couldn't help recognising the great part Wade had played in his success.

Mr Wade had invited him to lunch the day before, and had prepared him for the meeting with Mr Grahame.

"Take notice," he said, "when Grahame is out of his business—of which he never talks—he has no diversion aside from the pleasure of riding his hobby-horse—antiques. On this subject you are likely to get an overdose. Take my advice, though: stand it bravely. Mind, I don't propose your saying things incompatible with your dignity; but remember, Grahame is very sensitive to praise,—he thinks himself infallible. Renaissance is the subject he pursues

with zeal. Greek and Roman art are as blank to him as an Atzec idol. There are only three exceptions to the rule. Paul lately persuaded him that Boucher has his merit, and conquered his artistic tendencies for some painters of the Venetian school of the eighteenth century. Consequently he owns a picture of the French artist, a ceiling of Tiepolo, and a view of Venice by Guardi. On Tiepolo a mild criticism can be offered, but his Guardi is inviolable. He claims that the view of Piazza San Marco is the highest perfection Guardi ever reached, and is as jealous of the canvas as if he had the Koh-i-noor. He actually came very near kicking a Frenchman out of his house because the man was frank enough to say that he did not admire his Guardi as much as the one of the same view in the collection of Princess Matilde in Paris. He foamed with rage as he told me that an ass of a Frenchman had hinted his Guardi was a double of the one the Princess Matilde owns. You know, of course, that the word *replica* is often the gilded definition for copy."

"It is most fortunate," Wade summed up, "that you are so well up in Venetian painters. That will be a capital subject to interest Grahame. But while you can praise all the Guardis of Italian galleries and rave over those of the Wallace Collection, the one of Princess Matilde must be avoided—let that one alone."

"What a strange type of collector!"

"And so unlike an American," answered Wade; "though you can hardly call Grahame an American: he was born on the Emerald Isle. But to come back

to our mutttons, remember that the Guardi subject will certainly come up at lunch. That is his idol. Handle it carefully, or you may see a Grahame you never dreamt of seeing, and realise what a thin gloss of politeness covers the skin of some of our self-made multi-millionaires."

"I shall certainly be on my guard."

Palmieri wondered how so charming a girl as Helen could have such an impossible father,—a man of two distinct personalities in one mould—a clever, shrewd business man and a foolish collector of antiques.

When Palmieri reached Riverside Drive and saw the Grahame mansion he was impressed by the beauty of the position, and asked himself why New York wealth preferred the more commonplace Fifth Avenue to the magnificent promenade, bordering the picturesque bank of the Hudson river.

The night before, with the strong desire to see the home of Helen, Oddo had strolled along the picturesque promenade of Riverside. The house had appeared to him in the dark an imposing mass, while in broad daylight it looked only big. A building with too many reminiscences of known architecture cleverly stitched together but not harmoniously matched.

If the façade of the mansion was incongruous, the first impression of the interior was pleasing.

"The artistic soul of the late Paul Grahame must have stamped his taste on these walls," thought Palmieri when inside of the house. "The financier looks to me the inspirer of the obvious outside."

Entering the gorgeous drawing-room, Oddo had hardly taken in with a sweep of the eye the luxurious life of the Grahames when Helen entered.

"Mr Palmieri, are you really, really here—or am I in Italy?"

People who never have loved—if that pitiful genus ever existed—would be at a loss to understand what a revolution Helen's voice wrought in Oddo's soul,—the voice that had continually echoed in his life since she had left him.

"Helen, you cannot imagine what this is to me, to see and be near you again. And Mrs Grahame, I hope she is well?"

"She has just come in from a drive, and will answer for herself directly."

Helen had grown pale and a trifle thinner. She was not the blooming nymph Oddo had made love to in the Labyrinth at Montegalli, but still a pagan beauty, delicate as a Tanagra statuette.

"What have you been doing all this time?" she asked, when they were seated. There was a slight inflexion of reproach in her voice. "You see, I haven't lost my curiosity."

"I haven't been very busy, unless thinking comes under that category. I have thought only of you—you—you!"

"You have a queer way of thinking about me. Really not even to let me know that you were coming. In your last letter from Paris you never once referred to it."

"I had so many doubts, Helen; I was afraid you

had forgotten all about my promise. You can't imagine how I worried. Think of it—not one word from you since you left Florence. Why didn't you write?"

"Why didn't I write—what do you mean? I answered every letter. My last must have reached your villa about this time. It was such a long letter, too."

"That's strange—I haven't received *one*."

"I wonder why?"

"They may be coming back here. What did you write?" he asked, as his mother's meddling curiosity struck him.

"I don't remember—I wrote about so many things,—even of dear Uncle Paul's death."

"Mr Wade told me of that. I was looking forward to meeting your uncle here in New York. I remember how much you thought of him."

"It is a great sorrow. Uncle Paul spent much of his time in Europe; but when he was with us he was the life of the house."

"I noticed yesterday at Mr Wade's lunch how much Mr Grahame seemed to feel the loss of his brother. He spoke of him several times; always praising him."

"And to-day my father never ceases to praise you."

"I am glad of that, Helen. I was awfully pleased to meet him. He greatly interested me."

The man who cannot lie in a good purpose is a brute.

She looked searchingly into his eyes.

"Is it true? I almost dreaded your meeting him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Perhaps on account of the difference between his character and that of the people you've known. I am glad you like him; I was afraid you wouldn't. But it is all right now, and I have my wish. Do you remember, that night we were returning from Certosa to Florence, I made my bow to the moon—I believe there is such a thing as predestination. When I made that wish I was hardly serious."

"But *I* was. That very night I could have fought the greatest danger unknown like the warrior on that old slab. You recollect our translating the motto: *Osa e sará?* Well, my wish has also come true. In an old forgotten labyrinth I found a clue and dared to follow it, and here I am — my Ariadne."

"I am glad you found your way in this great city maze. *Meglio tardi che mai.*"

So interested was Oddo in talking with Helen that he had given only a hasty glance to the objects of art that surrounded him in the richly-decorated drawing-room. But he could accurately have described the marble chimney-piece with its lustrous caryatides and andirons of glaring bronze. He could have drawn the pattern of the Oriental rug on which Helen's foot rested; he could have modelled in clay, with his eyes shut, the Byzantine lion that faced him with

the sublime expression of a Chinese idol. All the rest was an orgie of shapes and colours, giving fantastic background to his divinity.

Mrs Grahame entering awakened him to neglected earth and his disregarded surroundings.

"What a charming home you have, Mrs Grahame," he said, after greetings were exchanged, "and how many beautiful things."

"Too many things, Mr Palmieri. My husband, when he thinks an object not good enough for his gallery, exiles it to the drawing-room. I sometimes dream of our first little home in New York, not with every comfort and yet no care."

"Doesn't it remind you of Pettinelli's shop?" Helen asked, laughing.

The comparison was so striking that Oddo was at a loss for a reply.

"Now that my husband no longer cares for all these old purchases of his," Mrs Grahame continued, "I often wish he would find another hospital. Mr Grahame's brother, Paul, used to say that if they belonged to him he would cart them off to Kirby's salerooms. My husband in his fancy for antiques has run the progressive course of motor-car sportsmen who are never satisfied with the size of their automobile."

Palmieri, about to leave, was grateful to ogre Grahame for not putting in an appearance. Although the old broker was not a bad man, there was such an excess of energy in him that it roiled Palmieri's blood. The force of will and self-confidence he manifested in



every act made of him a very unsympathetic personality.

"We shall be pleased if you will come to-morrow night to dinner," said Mrs Grahame to the willing Oddo. "We are quite *en famille*. My husband is anxious to show his new purchases to a few friends."

## CHAPTER III.

*DINER EN FAMILLE.*

No great merit could be granted the architect for the beautiful decoration of the dining-room in Mr Grahame's mansion. It had been brought from a historical castle of Touraine, and recomposed piece by piece in the Riverside house with great skill and craft by French workmen. The room was all in carved oak, simple and tasteful, with slight touches of gilding over the carving. Four large tapestries of French design hung on the walls: they represented different outdoor amusements of the Court of Henry II. Oddo noticed that two of the tapestries had among other personages the sombre figure of Caterina de' Medici of Florence.

No matter what might have been Grahame's idea of society and mourning etiquette, it was hardly to be expected that the exhibition of his new objects should have any official character. Mrs Grahame had explained to Palmieri that the dinner was quite *en famille*—only a few intimate friends would be present.

At table Palmieri sat in the place of honour next the hostess, while on her other side was a well-known figure of the financial world, Mr John Bartlett, a man that Wall Street brokers had learned to fear and *brocanteurs* of antiques to fleece. Notwithstanding his portly figure and air of a king of finance, he could hardly have tempted the brush of a Velasquez, but would, perhaps, have puzzled the one of a Sargent were it to confer on him a magnate's dignity. Unlike Grahame, he knew that a man who had spent his life making money could not step into the field of art-collecting without paying dear for his conceit. His friend Mr Mitchell, who sat next to Helen, was the director of Bartlett's artistic conscience—a man with the pursuits of a dilettante, and responsible for many good acquisitions in the Bartlett collection, and, at the same time, many bad ones. Mitchell had the typical bright face of an American *intellectual*, somewhat affected by a tincture of French mannerism. It was said that Mitchell had been a student in Paris, which might have accounted for the slight foreign colour. His style as a writer was considered elegant by those who mistook preciousness of language for originality. A member of all art society committees and Boards of the city, he could in a matter of art concerns *faire la pluie et le beau temps*. Intelligent? Of course he was; but, as often happens to climbing favourites of fortune, he had been raised to a lofty pitch of glory higher than his own genuine merit deserved. But, after all, does genuine merit exist? And if so, what is the symptom

by which to discover it, when in this century it becomes necessary for an artist or a literary author to be advertised like bottles of quack medicine or patent shoe-blackening? But what did it matter, now that Mitchell was the great of greatness, slumbering over the green laurels of fame?

Bartlett's wife, the only female guest, though of the ordinary over-ripe American type, must have been nice-looking in her youth. Now peroxide had lent new gold to her hair, and "veloutine" a twilight tint—a hue between the lily and the rose—to her fading complexion. A studied position of her head, always slightly bent forward as if in the act of listening, was intended to abate the impertinence of an ever-increasing double chin. The nose nature had endowed—a trifle minute for the rather too full-blown face—was now hopelessly losing importance. Still Mrs Bartlett had a fashionable air and unabashed pretence to youth. Under the spell of past praise to her statuesque form, her corsage was cut so as to leave a liberal portion of the bust exposed.

Mr Wade and Mr Bowler completed the familiar party. Bowler had been one of the closest friends to Paul Grahame. As an art-critic he had been accused of sacrificing sound judgment for the sake of a witty phrase.

"I know you are very fond of art, Mr Palmieri," said Mrs Grahame, when they were seated at table; "but I am afraid the pleasure you take in it may receive a severe trial this evening. When

Mr Bartlett, Mr Mitchell, and my husband get together, they hardly talk of anything but art and antiques."

"There is not a more interesting and inexhaustible subject," replied Palmieri, with a dash of absent-mindedness.

Helen, radiant in all her grace, was facing him, dressed in what seemed to the Italian a snowy cloud of veils. For one moment of such a vision he could willingly endure the boredom of an unintelligent collector like Bartlett, the subtle prosiness of a Mitchell, and, worst of all, listen to the eccentric Grahame talking of the Renaissance and violently exploding art theories at large.

"Mr Palmieri, I presume you have not yet visited our Museum?" Mr Mitchell inquired.

"I was there this morning; but owing to lack of time, I confess I made a rather hasty tour."

"Don't be afraid, Mr Palmieri," said the art-critic; "we shall not insist upon you giving an opinion,—it might be embarrassing."

"Not at all. I was most favourably impressed; only, as I say, my visit to the Metropolitan Museum was a short one."

"Our greatest obstacle," observed Mitchell, who was one of the Board, "is the rubbish that enters with the free ticket of 'gift.'"

Grahame, who had never given a pennyworth to the Museum, kept quiet. Not so Bartlett, who was, on the contrary, a generous donor.

"Well, Mitchell, that sounds ludicrous," he argued.

"How is the Museum to bring in art pieces unless people supply the money? It is no gold-mine, as far as I know."

"Perhaps I didn't explain myself clearly. Money is always welcome, but I can't say the same about the many gifts of art works we receive."

"I think you are right," said Wade. "Some of those paintings aren't worth the nails they hang on. I don't know why they are there, unless poor Cesnola kept them on the principle that the beautiful owes its virtue to contrast with the ugly. But that is rather a poor argument for an art collection."

"Cesnola did what he could," said Mitchell, "though he was not a great connoisseur of painting. You must remember he hadn't *carte blanche*. There was the Board at back of him."

"As well as before him," put in Bartlett.

"Yesterday night," informed Bowler, "at the dinner of the Architectural League, Mr Crowninshield concluded his speech by saying that, 'Of twenty-four members which compose the governing body of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, only three are artists.' Just think of it!"

"The Louvre has the same drawback," said Palmieri. "Aside from the curator, the *conservateurs* must have their word to say. There are too many of these members of the Board to make coming to agreement easy. I have been told that while they are discussing a proposed acquisition, the object often finds another purchaser."

"By the way, Mr Palmieri, if you have time,"

Bowler broke in, "you ought to give a glance at the painting of Napoleon."

"It is certainly worth seeing," said Helen, catching Palmieri's eye. "Is that a gift or a purchase, Mr Mitchell?"

"Ahem! I never trouble myself by going inside those modern rooms," interrupted Grahame.

"No? I think they are exquisitely arranged. Only the ladies of some of those portraits are so badly dressed, and look so old-fashioned." This observation came from Mrs Bartlett, who prided herself on a critical remark.

"Yet I'll stand by my Napoleon," held Bowler. "It is worthy Madame Tussaud's waxwork exhibition; but I have my doubts as to its being shown even there—outside the chamber of horrors."

"What is it like?" inquired Palmieri.

"It is an inflated Napoleon, wrapped in a home-made uniform, watching, in his usual pose, the yolk of an egg sink into a strata of marmalade. I believe the catalogue describes the painting as 'The Sun of Austerlitz.'"

"Well, Bowler, you may be certain that the *croûte* was a gift."

"That is plain truth, Mitchell. But why doesn't the Board put the word 'Gift' on such things? To warn the public, in the Paris Salon they label inferior paintings with an *Hors Concours*."

"Now that a new director has been nominated, it would be the right time for the Metropolitan to take the motto *Sordida pello*," said the prosy Mitchell.

"I shouldn't wonder if Sir Purdon Clark has a pretty hard task to perform," came from Wade.

"I have no doubt as to there being some cripples; but I had a very good impression of the Museum. I took particular notice of the fine paintings in the Marquand collection, and the splendid arms of the Duke de Dino."

"Bravo, Signore, bravo!" cried Bartlett; "I am glad to see you stand by our Museum."

"Well, after all," said Bowler, "the favourable opinion of Mr Palmieri rather corroborates Mitchell's theory that museums ought to accept, at least on principle, only gifts of money, and discourage art presents. With more money we could afford to buy collections of such importance as that of the Duke de Dino, a fine ready-made collection."

"But the Marquand collection of paintings was a donation," qualified Wade.

"Yes," Bowler went on, "but the time of Marquand is passed. He was a collector of the good epoch, a really passionate and intelligent hunter of fine pieces of art,—one of the legion that has ceased to exist with Quincy Shaw, and also, if you like, with poor Paul. Don't make that face, Grahame; I am outspoken when I say the true collector isn't to be found in America. We must go back to Irving's definition, 'In America, literature and the elegant arts grow up side by side with the coarser plants of daily necessity.'"

"But even Marquand occasionally sought the advice of a friend in his purchases," Mitchell observed, with elegant insinuation.



"Yes, but an able man like Villegas, not his political friends, nor a pack of fools scattered about Europe hunting antiques for his collection."

"I understand; the Metropolitan ought to consult a Bowler and then the Museum would be perfect," growled Grahame, who, after the remark of the art-critic, felt snappish and petty. "As for myself, I wouldn't accept the position of one of the Board even if they'd pay me; though I believe I'm better fitted than you, Bowler, who, like all fustian literary people and art parrots, talk a good deal about art and never buy a cent's worth; always tell what you don't like instead of what you do like, and what has been done wrongly, but never suggest what should be done."

"That's the thing, Bowler; let me tell you that the Metropolitan Museum could easily dispense with critics, but I doubt if it could with millionaire offers."

Bowler's stinging remark had also caused a considerable rise in Bartlett's temperature.

"But aren't we labouring under a misunderstanding?" ventured the critic.

"No, no," Bartlett's eyes flashed as he retorted, "don't try to wrap your ideas in fine words. We know what you think of us. But we buyers have a good deal of practice; while the art-writer who knows what he is writing about has yet to be discovered."

"But you seem to forget that our friend Mitchell is not only an art-writer but a good connoisseur, too," intervened Bowler.

Mitchell made a graceful bow in acceptance of the compliment.

"But there is *the* one and only Mitchell in America," said Bartlett; "he is one among the few connoisseurs who, like Director Bode of Berlin, can claim the double title of good art-writer and first-rate antiquary. Mitchell is unique. Had he the chance of ruling the Metropolitan Museum I can assure you he would crown his career with such a monument as Bode has built to his fame in the Berlin Museum. The idea of borrowing a director from Europe for our Museum when we had a Mitchell right here at hand!"

"I am quite confused," said Mitchell, looking apologetically towards Palmieri; "I trust to your interpretation of such friendly flattery."

"Bowler," Grahame ruminated out loud, "all summed up, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, I presume I ought to appeal to the ladies for protection," the art-critic suggested good-naturedly.

"Yes, the Amazons will protect you," exclaimed Mrs Bartlett, celebrated for making unlucky comparisons.

The heat of the argument had about reached its acme when it slightly fell, through the tact of Mrs Grahame, who disliked stormy discussions that so often ripen into unpleasantness.

"Mr Palmieri, how do you like our greater New York?" she asked almost abruptly.

"Very much, indeed. My enthusiasm arose at a

first sight of the harbour and has been increasing ever since."

"Our harbour is beautiful," said Helen. "Perhaps the coming home has something to do with it, but I always see it as the most imposing harbour in the world."

"And I think, too, that the statue of Liberty is simply grand," declared Mrs Bartlett. "You might add, where is there another like it in all the world?" A circular flash of her gemmed hand emphasised this rapid judgment of the globe's wonders. "To my mind, neither the Venus de Milo nor the one of the Medicis can compete with it."

"Yes, you certainly can say there's nothing like it in this world or the next," said Wade banteringly. "The statue of Liberty has a great advantage over the others; it can be seen without the partial eclipse of a portly German guide or a Saturn-like ring of screening tourists."

"Speaking of the Venus de Milo, when I was in Paris this last time I heard that the Louvre Museum had been duped in one of its recent purchases. Do you know anything about it, Mr Palmieri?"

"No, I have heard nothing of that kind since the famous Tiara case."

"That was a clever trick; but I can't understand how they get so bamboozled. Well, anyway, they had to pay for their ignorance, and I am glad of it."

"Grahame would understand," said Mitchell, "if he saw the skilled work of some of those Continental forgers—not only incomparable imitators of objects

of virtu, but real geniuses in setting up traps. There was a loose report in Paris that when one of the Rothschilds started on a tour of the Orient, a syndicate of art-dealers sent ahead a shipful of *trouvailles*. It is, of course, a legend; but, nevertheless, the enterprising spirit of some dealers, my dear Grahame, is beyond imagination."

"But you, Mr Palmieri, living in Europe and interested in art, you must have a collection of amusing anecdotes," said Bowler.

"Oh, no. Occasionally I hear floating reports, just as you do, I presume."

"Mr Palmieri is an authority on antiques," said Wade; "he has written a clever book on bric-à-brac, and quotes in his work some amusing impositions."

Of course Mr Bowler was very curious to know all about Palmieri's work; but the latter skilfully dodged entering into details about his writings. He had made up his mind not to be dragged into the antique discussion that had already become irksome.

"Is it true, Mr Palmieri," asked Bowler, "that spurious antiques are sent to Sardinia, where they have a better chance to lead us strangers astray?"

"I couldn't state that as a fact, though I have heard of furniture bought near Sassari that afterwards proved to be antique before its time."

The conversation here turned on forgeries. Every one had his pet story to tell. Bowler went so far as to state that antiques of Italy and France were made in America, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and sent over to the old countries to acquire the mark.

"I think, Mr Palmieri, your law ought to punish such rascals," Mitchell said. "Though, to be sure, there are in Italy, as in every country, honest dealers who have everything to lose by such brigandage."

Bartlett nodded his head in sign of approbation, with a motion that resembled an automaton.

"I disagree with you there, Mitchell. I don't think there ought to be a law to protect fools," said Grahame. "The antiquarian field is territory where fools have no right to enter."

"Yet," observed Mitchell mildly, "in these days the science of imitation is so great that even the shrewdest buyer cannot feel safe."

"He can, if he knows what he's about."

"Now, Grahame," said Bowler, "you talk as if it were downright impossible for you to be served like other people, that the one who can palm off a modern antique on you is not yet born."

"I haven't been cheated so far," answered Grahame with a look of pride mingled with contempt, "and I can assure you that it lies to my own credit. Why should I look forward at this late day to be made a fool of?"

Bowler might have cast into Grahame's face that the death of Paul would leave him a bad swimmer in the flood of antiques, but he refrained, knowing that his teasing spirit had already reached the limit.

Palmieri, who had heard old collectors of objects of art say that no one was sure-footed in that line, could have laughed at Grahame's foolish boast, but took advantage of the absorbing controversy to talk with

Mrs Grahame, whose skill had failed to appease the argumentativeness of her guests.

"I begin to dream of Italy again," she was saying, "particularly of your city. We've been talking of taking a villa there for the season."

"That would be delightful," Palmieri answered, darting a glance at Helen, who had joined in the noisy conversation with her eyes. She was looking anxiously round the assembly of disputers, those water-drinkers who had reached the madness of bacchanals.

"Now, Grahame, what you assert about yourself is bordering on perfection."

"It is my conviction, Mitchell, and a conviction is not easily shaken off."

There was hardly any need of such an avowal; everybody knew what Grahame was when—as he defined it—he had acquired a "conviction."

"Go ahead, then. We'll grant that every piece you've ever bought comes up to the standard mark; but to talk about the future, it's absurd, you know." These words were thrown out by Bartlett, whose good-nature was pretty well exhausted.

"Will you make it a bet?" Grahame challenged.

"How?" answered the other, spurred by the word "bet" that so rarely leaves American temperament indifferent. "How'll we bet? I'm willing to accept, but if it is for the future, one cannot wait the rest of one's life to fulfil it."

"I am willing to bet, and make good too. State the amount and the time, and let the stakes be as high as you like."

"Might I suggest an original form to lay a wager?" ventured the art-critic. "State a period, say five years, and have the stakes increased with the inverted proportion of the time. For instance, if Grahame gets cheated within one year, he will have to pay five times the final stake, and so on proportionally; if Bartlett lose, he will have to pay the maximum of the stakes."

"I will bet a good square ten thousand any time you want, and in any form," said Grahame. "Are you ready, Bartlett?"

"Quite ready."

"That's square," answered the other, snapping his fingers in the air. "And are you also ready to bet on your ability, as I have bet on mine, Bartlett? I'll throw Mitchell into the bargain, too. Can you swear that you have never been cheated, as I can, and make a bet for the past and future?"

"Oh dear, no. I don't believe in invulnerability, or I wouldn't have made the bet."

"Suppose we talk of something else," said Mitchell; "we have neglected Mr Palmieri. I am afraid he will have a poor opinion of Americans at large."

Grahame was too shrewd not to see the point.

"I have an anecdote to relate," he said, "and perhaps Mr Palmieri can furnish some interesting details, as the comical part of it took place in Italy. It is a good story, about two Americans abroad and a bronze door."

"How did you find that out?" exclaimed Mitchell wildly.

"Then it is true, Bartlett, that you bought a bogus antique bronze door?"

"It is true; but who was it told you that we stepped on the wrong door-sill?"

"A big blunder like that isn't usually kept in the dark."

"The secret of Midas, it must have been in the wind, then," said Mitchell, "because we made up our mind never to mention it to anybody."

"You might give us a few details; I know they must be racily romantic," said Wade; "the Legend of the Bronze Door sounds like an Arabian Nights tale."

"I haven't the knack of telling a story, and there isn't much anyway to tell," said Mitchell, looking a little red. "Our experience was simple enough. We were at Florence looking about for a door. Finding nothing there, Bartlett and I were starting off for Rome when a man came to the hotel and said to me that he had heard in Paris—an American had told him—that we were looking for a door, and that he knew of a splendid one. Naturally we supposed it was through Paul Grabame he had heard what we were in search of. The man said the one he was offering was the door of a chapel in an out-of-the-way place. That, by the way, was the only part of his story which was true. I was never in such a God-forsaken spot as he took us to,—a place away up in the Apennines, called Boscopini, which means 'pine-wood' in English. The door in question had, he informed us, escaped all notice, because at the time of the French invasion,



when Napoleon I. was pillaging churches and museums and laying his hand on every artistic object that came in his way, the door had been covered with brown paint to make it look like wood. As it was on a wooden frame, no one suspected that it was bronze. The discovery had been made only recently. He added that the owner preferred having the money to an old door that the Government might confiscate at any time. The explanation sounded reasonable, as the Italian Parliament was just about to approve a law restricting private art property."

"I know," said Grahame, "that if we Americans like to get a thing we go ahead and get it; but it is a pretty daring step to tear out the door of a chapel, even if it is private property."

"Well," Mitchell went on, "the man told us if we liked it well enough to buy it, he would see to it being replaced by another door."

"Go on," said Wade with impatience; "what next?"

"The result was that Bartlett and I made a bargain for it there on the spot. The price we paid is, at least, our secret."

"But what became of the door?" asked Wade.

"We took it to Paris, where Bartlett called an expert."

"It was you that called him, Mitchell," interposed Bartlett.

"Good; the great Mitchell resorted to an expert," cried Grahame.

"An *animæ custos*," ironically corrected Bowler.

"Never mind that, Bowler. *Semel in anno licet insanire,*" Mitchell answered loftily.

"Let Mitchell go on with his story. What about this expert in bronzes?"

"*'Faux comme un jeton,'* said our expert. 'This is the third from Italy that has come under my examination.' But it was impossible to get out of him who the other victims were."

"I never was so mad in all my life," said Bartlett. "We wanted to go to law and have that squint-eyed rascal that took us to Boscopini arrested; but on thinking the thing over we decided to keep the precious door for my barn."

"Squint-eyed?" demanded Wade with a guffaw. "Did he have the complexion of a Havana cigar and a voice in a doloroso key?"

"I don't know about that; but his English was good enough, and I believe he had a sallow complexion."

"That's my man," said Wade. "I am sure of it."

"Rubelli!" exclaimed Palmieri. "He is an old acquaintance—quite a well-known fraud in Florence—almost a celebrity of the kind."

"You don't mean to say you know him?" said Bartlett, turning to Wade.

"Yes, if I am not mistaken. I was once taken in by some of his crocodile moisture."

"Ah! Wade has a story too," said Bartlett, eager to hear that somebody else had shared his fate.

"Mine is too long a yarn. I'll promise to tell it at our next meeting."

"It seems incredible to me," grunted Grahame, "that you fellows allow yourselves to be cheated like a pack of donkeys. As for myself, I've never been done, and never intend to be."

"You make yourself out invulnerable," said Wade.

"No, I am prudent, suspicious to the extreme, and that saves me, I suppose. I began to collect objects of art years before any of you ever dreamed of doing it. There is nothing like precaution, I have always found."

The guests rose from the table.

"Now," said Grahame, "I am going to show you something worth seeing," and he threw open the doors of the gallery that held his art treasures.

Palmieri, who had sought Helen's side, came last, talking gaily.

He had hardly entered the room when his eyes fell upon the bust of Simonetta standing on a pedestal.

Accustomed as he had grown to the shock of the unexpected, he was not prepared to see his work thus continually start up to persecute him. The thought that the bust had gone to England had long set his mind at rest. Now he knew that the supposed English collector at the auction of the Hôtel Drouot was no one else than the late Paul Grahame.

The objects that Grahame had brought from Paris were ostentatiously arranged in a semicircle, so that one could get an excellent impression at a glance. The bust of Simonetta, very likely in deference to the price paid for it, had a conspicuous place in the

middle of the hemicycle, where the curve neared the wall. The bust stood on a pedestal, isolated by a large space at each side; the illumination pouring from the ceiling played over the head, giving a delicate effect of light and shade.

Some little time was spent in looking at the new acquisitions—Mr Grahame forcing compliments on every object.

"Here, Signor Palmieri, you are a Florentine—this is work by one of your compatriots. You can see for yourself that it's a Desiderio da Settignano."

The emotions that Palmieri experienced were somewhat conflicting. At first he felt like borrowing an excuse to leave the house. His second thought was to remain and brave the situation—anything rather than reveal his secret. Moreover, the square jaw facing him did not invite confession.

"Isn't it a beauty?" the host was saying. "Paul wrote that he got it at the Hôtel Drouot, and had to fight hard for it. I am glad he won the prize—though it can hardly be called cheap, even without taking into account the custom-house tax."

Grahame's friends were lost in admiration of the beautiful Florentine head.

"That's where you find strength," said Bowler, going through the act of modelling to enforce his words. "There's what I call power, vigour——"

"I should say so," Grahame put in. "If Desiderio hadn't those qualities, who had? What do *you* think of it, Mitchell?"

The art-writer fished for the monocle swinging on

his waistcoat, and going closer to the work, eyed it with the scruple of a skilled connoisseur. "Very fine—very fine indeed," he admitted.

"You see plain enough it's a Desiderio," Grahame continued to reiterate.

"Yes, I suppose it is. Still, I shouldn't care to certify to it. I must see it by daylight and give it a closer study. It certainly is good work of the fifteenth century, and if not a Settignano—it—might be a Laurana, or that artist that Müntz calls *Mattre des bustes de femme et de masques*. There are several works by this unknown master, and presumably many of them represent the same person—Beatrice d'Arragona, second wife of Mathias Corvinus. Of this well-known beauty there is a fine bust in the Dreyfus Collection of Paris and one in the Louvre. Others are scattered about—in Berlin, the Ambras Collection in Vienna, Naples and Palermo Museums. The portrait of Diva Sforza, Duchess of Urbino, in the Bargello of Florence, is also the supposed work of the same artist. For a long time many of these productions were attributed to Desiderio, now my friend Doctor Bode thinks they are by Laurana, but of course Molinier does not agree with the learned Director of the Berlin Museum."

"But can any of those busts surpass this one?" Grahame interrogated, in deadly fear that the authoritative Mitchell would speak of something superior to his bust.

"They may excel in some qualities, perhaps, but this is infinitely finer in feeling," answered the dex-

terous critic, using one of the elastic words that artistic phraseology so richly possesses.

"You are lucky, Grahame." Bartlett was always ready to praise after Mitchell had admired.

"Don't you think," inquired Mrs Bartlett, "the women of that time had a very unbecoming way of dressing their hair? That severe style is so trying."

"Quite à la *Cléo de Mérode*," said Wade.

"No matter, I am sure I'm right. Don't you think, Mr Mitchell, that our sex has better taste nowadays? The old-time women made such frights of themselves."

"Well, I don't know, Mrs Bartlett," answered Mitchell leniently; "you can hardly draw a comparison between the two styles. The hair of this girl is dressed similar to some of the Ghirlandaio portraits we see in the Tornabuoni Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. You must remember that the ladies of Dante's city were somewhat excusable for simplicity in dress, seeing they were subject to a very severe sumptuary law."

Helen and Oddo had moved to a far end of the room, where they were deep in conversation.

Grahame now noticed that the Florentine had not joined in the chorus of praise bestowed on his new purchase.

"Where's Signor Palmieri? Come here, Signor; we are waiting your appreciation. Have you ever seen a finer work by this master? It goes ahead of anything of its kind in New York city."

Palmieri confronted Mr Grahame as a victim might gaze at the edge of the axe when about to lay his head on the block.

"Ah, ah!" roared Bartlett, "Mr Palmieri has his suspicions. Look out, Grahame, he is a Florentine, and considered a first-rate judge—you told us so, Wade?"

"I bet he doesn't think it a Desiderio da Settignano," said Mitchell, rejoicing over the possibility of Grahame having been cheated.

Grahame's jaw grew more square and protruding. The coolness of the Italian before such a rare bust was a crime in itself that his silence aggravated.

"You don't think it a Desiderio de Settignano?"

"I am sorry to say I don't think it is."

"Why—why not?"

"I should really prefer not to tell why; not now, at least——"

"Grahame," said Mitchell, speaking low, "if Paul got cheated, Signor Palmieri is charitable: he prefers to break the news to you in private."

The gibes of his friends only increased Grahame's anger. Who was this Palmieri that his judgment should be regarded as infallible? He insisted upon Palmieri giving the reason for his opinion.

"Mr Palmieri," said Helen, "do tell papa what you think, even if the truth isn't agreeable."

And undoubtedly it was not at all palatable to Mr Grahame when Palmieri said—

"The bust is certainly modern. I express the opinion only because you insist upon it."

"There you are, Grahame! Put that in your pipe and smoke it," Bartlett said with a laugh.

"Now, sir, will you kindly tell me why you imagine it to be modern? Where do you get such a notion? You must understand that that bust cost a good deal of money. Do me the favour——"

"Mr Grahame, it would be wiser for you to have an expert."

"No, sir. This bust has already been seen by an expert, and as you have made the accusation, it is for you to prove your words. Why do you think it is modern? Speak out."

"Because it has a modern line."

At this answer Grahame not only lost patience but all courtesy.

"Grahame, do be quiet," Wade whispered; "Mr Palmieri is your guest to-night, and will become your expert to-morrow if you wish."

But the excited man refused to be pacified. Helen was alarmed: from her father's knitted brow and tone of voice she realised that a tempest was brewing.

Grahame had, however, muttered something that wounded Palmieri's national pride, and with a frankness that does not always distinguish his countrymen, he said—

"Mr Grahame, it is modern, because it is my own work."

In the chilly silence that followed this declaration Palmieri briefly told the story of the bust.

"Preposterous!" said Grahame. The expression accompanying his sneering words caused Palmieri to



notice for the first time his resemblance to his dead brother.

"I have told the truth," Palmieri went on; "I ventured to warn your brother at the sale, although I was unaware of his identity until this evening. I wanted the bust back in my hands, and tried to buy it in. What more could one do? I have no proof to offer you—oh, yes—there is one, but not available. The proof is inside the head; it is a coin of the Pope, a bajocco; I put it there when modelling it," and Oddo cast an appealing glance at his Simonetta.

"Preposterous," repeated Grahame in a tone that sounded contemptible to Palmieri. "I shall not break the bust; and excuse me, sir, your tale sounds—like a cock-and-bull story."

"What I have said is the truth," Palmieri answered coldly, "and what you may believe is nothing to me." And bidding Mrs Grahame and Helen good-night, he bowed himself out of the room.

He was in the hall preparing to leave the house when a door opened softly and he heard Helen call him.

Oddo stepped back into the little salon. Helen was weeping. It was with an effort she tried to speak.

"Oh, Oddo, is this the end of everything——?"

"It is for you to decide, Helen. I love you—I came to take you back with me. My faith, my life, my *all* are in your hands." And he pressed his lips to her forehead. Helen, with wild impulse, threw her arms round his neck.

"I love you, Oddo," she sobbed; "I love you more

than I love any other—any one. I can't bear to have you go in this way."

Passionately Oddo covered the tearful face with kisses. "*Cara, cara,*" he whispered, "*Helen, cara—sempre tuo——*"

A moment later he was in the street.

## CHAPTER IV.

## AFTER THE STORM.

"THIS is for you, Mr Palmieri," said the clerk of the Waldorf-Astoria while handing him the key of his room.

Palmieri took the package of letters absent-mindedly and made his way to the elevator.

If he had been asked how he got back to the hotel that night he would not have been able to answer. Vaguely he recollected leaving the over-heated house in Riverside and finding himself in the midst of a biting blast that swept the dust and dead leaves in cloudy spirals. As he struggled against the wind he still felt the scowl of Mr Grahame fixed upon him. He had been stunned for the moment, but the words escaping Helen's lips poured such a balm on his soul as to make him heedless of everything else. But the strain he had undergone had left him sore in every limb, and he hoped repose would put his thoughts in order.

As feeling gave way to quiet reasoning, Palmieri asked himself what he would do.

Good sense told him that Grahame had behaved like a child. Was it possible that the shrewd financier was but an infant when it came to commonplace questions of everyday life? Certainly it was unreasonable for Grahame to demand his frank opinion and become offended upon his giving it. Yet a voice broke in upon Oddo's meditations, saying: "It is you, my dear fellow, who are in the wrong. Learn first that common-sense is a rare gift, and, secondly, that all men reason like Grahame. Men cannot bear to listen to a plain truth, though they will always maintain that they like to hear it. Now, you know a good deal about art, but as far as human nature goes you are a mere novice. You have changed little since the time when, as a boy, you learned with wonder that the baker sold bread for a higher price than it cost him, and then you discovered that trade meant profit. You still believe that people can be divided into two classes, honest and dishonest, and things into true and false, as a ripe peach may be split into two parts,—you forget that there would still be a stone clinging to one part. Don't you know there are lies of every shade, from grey to white, intended to cover the shocking nakedness of truth?"

Oddo thought a minute, then, "I am glad I spoke the truth," he said aloud.

He took up the package of letters and newspapers and opened it. An envelope with a black border caught his eye. It was addressed in his mother's handwriting.

"What has happened?" he exclaimed. He knew

Donna Giulia's ideas on etiquette of mourning for distant relatives was rather exaggerated.

"Alberto has shot himself," gasped Oddo, on reading the first line of the letter. "Can it be possible? How terrible!"

His mother added very little to the startling news. Her letter ended by stating that her grief was so great she could not write details of Alberto's tragic end, but she was sending newspapers containing the whole story.

The gay Alberto, so full of life, so attached to the pleasures of the world!—could it be possible he was no more?

Reading over again the words "shot himself," as if to inure his mind to the terrible fact, Oddo muttered between clenched teeth, "Gaspero Bandini."

A letter of Alberto's—his last one—came with the package. It had followed him with the others in his pilgrimage from city to city, and had been finally forwarded from Boston. The letter, written in an unusually firm hand, informed Oddo of what had happened in Paris between the writer and Bandini, and how, after the latter had insulted the memory of his mother, he, Alberto, had lost all control of himself, and had left the Antiquarian for dead.

But the old wretch had revived and gone to Florence full of revenge. There he had harassed him with legal papers, forcing the payment of his claims by threatening to put the palace under the hammer, and had further brought against him a most ridiculous charge of theft.

"Although," concluded Alberto in his letter, "I am aware that no one would believe such an absurd accusation, I am tired of fighting against evil chance and fate.

"From the sneers of my friends I feel convinced that I should always be looked upon as the associate of Bandini—which it is true I am.

"Inside the envelope you will find my will. I leave the palace—or what there is left of it—to you, Oddo, together with my name. It will be in worthier hands than mine. Alas, now it will be in mine only an instant longer, as my life ends with this letter."

Asking pardon of Oddo for disposing of his work without his consent, and for the trouble he had caused, Alberto concluded his letter with the touching farewell, "Dear Oddo, if only I had listened to you!"

Palmieri read the letter over again.

"Poor Alberto," he mused,—for in spite of all his cousin's defects he had been fond of the reckless fellow, and had remained faithful to him since they were boys together.

The newspapers gave a full account of the suicide of Count Alberto Saccetti. He had been found dead in his room. The supposition was that the Count's financial troubles had distressed his mind to such an extent as to drive him to take his life. Main particulars of Alberto's funeral were given in the Florentine papers. There was the long list of nobility who followed the body to the grave; the harping Pharisee, too, had assisted at the last fare-

well that he might chant once more, "I told you so." But Alberto was at rest.

"To what *nothing* life hangs. If *I* should die?"

In ordinary circumstances, Oddo's gay cynicism over society customs might have caused him to imagine the decorative mourning of his mother, the wreath of artificial flowers provided for such an occasion, and carefully packed in a dismal-looking black tin box with a glass cover, then hung up on the grave, where the curious public could witness sorrow canned and sealed as safely as Cross and Blackwell lobsters. His objective mind could easily have pictured his own burial rites at the Villa degli Olmi—the long-faced invited, the crocodilian sympathy of the inheritors, and all the comic coreography of an Italian funeral. But Oddo in reality was in no mood for such vagaries that had sometimes passed through his mind on observing the ambitious display attending some fashionable funeral.

"Alberto is at rest," he repeated.

How strange are the routes thought takes. Why was it at this tragic moment the figure of his cousin came to his mind masked in the garb of Harlequin, with which he had scored a triumph the year before at the Veglione, the mask-ball of the Pergola? How could he conciliate that gay multi-coloured figure, shifting in the crowd, voluble as quicksilver, flourishing his wand over friend and enemy, with a stark, black-robed figure in the coffin? How could he associate the changeable expression of his cousin's face with the stiff, crisped mouth, and the uncon-

cerned grimace that death puts on a marble countenance?

Palmieri threw aside the newspapers, tired and nauseated by that grim farce called life, or, as Alberto had defined it, a comedy with a tragic ending. Those words now seemed prophetic, and he was wondering if his cousin could have had a premonition when he uttered them that tragedy would seal his own brief youth.

Smoking cigar after cigar, Oddo paced up and down the room. The restless mood that had taken possession of him helped to dispel fatigue. The heat of the chamber was intense. He opened the window, and leaned out to breathe the fresh night air. Looking down into the deserted street, the stillness and loneliness of the great city was appalling.

"I cannot think of sleep," he said to himself.

Throwing on his heavy street coat he made his way to the lift. On the ground floor music was still going on; he hastened through the groups of people and reached the street.

Coming from Broadway a car passed like a flash, to stop somewhere near the 'Herald' building. Palmieri got on it with no definite intention. Few people were inside: a gentleman half asleep was in one corner, and from his half-open overcoat peeped out the white cravat and glossy lapel of his evening suit. Facing Palmieri sat a couple, black, and shining with the lustre of bronze. The negro had the exaggerated elegance of a minstrel. From his dusky head, set like a cannon-ball over the shining



ring of a celluloid collar, came out conspicuously the projecting jaw, the smirking, thick-lipped gash, and broad depressed nose.

Notwithstanding Palmieri's perturbed mind he watched the couple with the curiosity of an alien. It was evident that the negro was paying court to his lady-love, whom he politely addressed as Miss Jefferson. When he asked her to accept the posy from the button-hole of his Prince Albert, she beamed a smile that suggested the expression of a face carved on a cocoanut. The spectacle was somewhat repulsive. Could this grinning monkey in petticoats claim membership to the gentler sex, and the title of "Miss"? He had crossed swords for negro rights, and sat upon the American Utopia of forbidden inter-marriage with the race; and bravely too had he fought in a country where there were no negroes, but now—his sentiment was less ardent.

"Eighty-fourth," cried the conductor, pushing open the car door.

Palmieri stepped out, and stood watching the car disappear. By the shaking branches of trees he realised that he was at Central Park. Attracted by undefined desire he turned towards Riverside.

The violent gale had abated, leaving a cold breeze sweeping from the Hudson. Riverside was silent and dreary; only the monotonous step of a night-patrolling policeman was heard a short distance ahead. Palmieri crossed the road, and as he walked along the avenue he hurried to keep warm. Nothing could be discerned on the side where the river flowed save

an abyss of dark, with timid lights mysteriously gliding on the water. At his right stretched a long, dull, uniform line of buildings, occasionally interrupted by an intersecting street.

At a near corner the massive house of the Grahames faced him ; at one window glimmered a light.

Could it be Helen's room ?

As he stood wondering a carriage drove down the Avenue and stopped at the house. Some one descended and entered the open door as if he were an expected visitor.

"It is the doctor ; I feel certain of it," Oddo murmured to himself.

He crossed the road a few steps below, and coming up from the other side ventured to question the coachman.

"Is anybody ill at Mr Grahame's house ?"

"Sure we don't go out for fun this time of night," was the gruff answer.

"Do you know who is ill ?"

"No, sir," came from the top of the hansom-cab as the driver disposed himself to take a doze.

Palmieri nervously paced up and down the street. At last the carriage drove off, and the light at the window finally disappeared.

## CHAPTER V.

## HELEN.

THAT unhappy night Helen Grahame could not sleep.

She had gone weeping to her room; and now, with no more tears left to weep, she sat, half disrobed for bed, musing on what had happened that evening.

How Oddo would judge her father, she thought sadly.

Helen admired the dignity with which her lover had left the house after quietly replying to the insult offered him. It was alone his good breeding, she knew, that had kept his quick Italian blood from betraying what he felt.

He had gone—perhaps for ever.

Helen knew her father's obstinacy; it was the dominant trait of his rough opinionated character. Would he, she wondered, ever acknowledge that he had done her lover a great wrong?

Oddo had been represented as a liar—was one of "the pack of liars" to which her father had contemptuously referred after his guest's departure. Ah!

if only her father would look at things as other people did, would deliberate before making up his mind, then he might have been persuaded that Oddo's tale, despite its strange combination of circumstances, was not at all unlikely. Life was full of just such coincidences as those which had caused the bust to fall into her uncle Paul's hands. What, after all, had offended her father's pride was that his brother, with his long experience and ability, should make such a mistake. It was this that had smarted so; her father's mortified self-complacence had taken refuge in rudeness unpardonable in a host.

Self-possessed as Oddo had been, he was powerless to produce the proof to which he alluded,—the proof so jealously guarded by the smiling Simonetta; she alone could furnish it.

What was to be done? Helen asked herself.

Then the thought came to her that perhaps the coin was lodged in some hidden crack of the clay where it could be reached without damage to the bust.

A few minutes later Helen was softly descending the staircase on her way to the gallery. The idea possessed her that she might be able to find the coin; she was curious, too, to look at Oddo's work—work which could be taken for that of a great Florentine master. To her independent artistic sense it seemed wonderful. What kind of judges were those who sung the praises of art one day and were ashamed the next of having done so? If the bust was good before, why not afterwards? The bust was not changed by the fact that it happened to be modern. To her Simonetta

looked more beautiful than ever. After Oddo had gone, and Helen had returned to the gallery, she had heard Bartlett and the great Mitchell talking aside, seeking to excuse themselves for having mistaken the bust for an antique. Mitchell had gone so far as to take advantage of his foggy criticism. "Of course," he said, "it is impossible to tell the crude truth to a man like Grahame; but you must have noticed, Bartlett, that I had my suspicions. You heard me say I should prefer to give my judgment by day. I stand by the old Italian proverb, 'Women and linen must never be chosen by candle-light.'"

Opening the door of the gallery, Helen made her way to the bust of Simonetta. By the flickering dim light of her candle the clay head gave the impression almost of being alive. She felt moved at the idea that it was her lover's handiwork, and she recollected how modestly he had apologised for being a sculptor, that day among the tombs of the Acciaiuoli at Certosa.

The bust temporarily stood on a small pillar, with its base protruding over the pedestal. Helen, kneeling, lowered the candle so that she could see a great part of the hollowed interior of the head. Where had Oddo put the coin? Helen thrust her hand inside, and tried by groping to find evidence of where the token lay in hiding; but she could feel nothing. She closely searched everywhere with eager eyes. The bust had taken inside a burned tone, and showed plainly the rough traces left by Oddo's fingers in removing the superfluous clay; but no sign of the coin was apparent. In the upper part of the cavity was the hole left by

the wooden support when the clay was fresh,—it might be in that hole. Then it would be impossible to get it out without breaking the bust.

Why not break it? As the idea of giving a little push to the head that held the secret flashed upon her, Helen could hear her heart flutter.

"Dear me," she said as she seated herself, "I came so near doing it."

Motionless as a statue herself, Helen sat staring at Simonetta. The candle she had placed on a console near by cast a feeble light, causing the head of Simonetta to emerge like a dark mass sharply outlined against the coloured silk hanging of the wall. The head was in profile. The more Helen looked, the more she wondered where had she seen a resemblance to the silhouette.

In her overwrought state she could set her mind on nothing, until the name of Simonetta—together with what might have decided Oddo to choose such a pretty name—took her back to the Pitti Gallery of Florence, where she recollected to have seen a masterly portrait called "*La bella Simonetta*." But in her unbiassed judgment Botticelli's masterpiece had not the charm of the one that stood before her. This was considerably gentler in form, with sparkling youth throughout, refreshed by the subtle perfume of expressive innocence. And to think it was Oddo's work! She felt tempted to turn on the glare of the chandelier to look at it in all its fascination, yet she feared some one might come to disturb her reverie. Half sunk in the mystery of shade, the room was not the same to her;

she dreaded to see it again flooded with light as it had been a few hours before.

The household asleep, alone in the silence of night, watching before the bust of Simonetta, with burning candle, Helen, white and pure as vestal maid, kept vigil. The dumb motionless clay was all that made her feel Oddo's presence in that now to her lonely house.

It was in the small hours of the night that Mrs Grahame entering the gallery found Helen sitting, with lustrous eyes, staring fixedly at the bust of Simonetta, on her cheeks two long crystal tears. The light still burning before the statue was about to expire.

"Helen—Helen—dear child, what are you doing here?" gasped the worried mother. "I was terrified at not finding you in your room. Why did you give me such a fright? Speak, darling; what are you doing here?"

Helen, waking as from a trance, burst into tears.

"Oh, mamma, help me if you can. I am so unhappy—he came here and was insulted in our house—I am heartbroken."

There was no need of confession. The loving heart of a mother had divined the trouble.

"Come, Helen, let me help you to your room. Your forehead is burning and your hands are like ice. All you need is rest."

"Rest!" cried Helen in desperation. "I came here because there was none up there. I thought I was going crazy. I could have opened the window and—and——"

"Helen, don't, dear. Everything will be done to make you happy."

Mrs Grahame tried to put a persuasive inflection into her words, though she had no conviction as to the truth of what she was saying.

"But how, mamma? How can I ever be happy again? I thought my brain was giving way—How? Do you think Oddo will take such an insult? or do you think my father, who never believes himself in the wrong, will apologise for his coarseness?"

"Helen, you must not speak in that way of your father," said Mrs Grahame. "Your father is a good man."

"Oh, yes,—but heartless. He would rather see me over there," she pointed towards the Hudson, "than have anything happen to one of these detestable old things."

"Helen, dear, you do not realise what you are saying. There is nothing your father wouldn't do for you. Think how he has brought you up, sparing nothing for your education. Come to bed; come, dear——"

"I wish he had spent nothing. Had I been brought up differently I should feel less disgust for roughness. Money isn't everything, mamma; there are other things to make us happy. This daily routine of money-making has become hateful to me."

Helen's girlish frame shook convulsively, and, with her hands against her breast, she said breathlessly, "I feel such pain here; I wish I were dead—anything but this."



Mrs Grahame now fully realised to what an extent Helen's sensitive mind had been affected by her father's behaviour. She herself had grown accustomed to her husband's brusque ways; but that night his conduct had exceeded the bounds of reason, and he had shown no more self-control than a spoiled froward child.

Mrs Grahame experienced the feeling of rebellion. She would have liked to go and relieve her mind freely to her husband, who, placid as a gargoyle, was in bed sleeping the sleep of the just man; but Helen was not in a condition to be left alone.

Mrs Grahame folded her daughter in her arms and kissed her. "Dear child, think of your poor mother," said she entreatingly.

Helen, with vacant gaze, returned her mother's kiss.

"Do you think I shall ever see him again?" she asked.

"Yes—yes," replied Mrs Grahame, haggard with anxiety.

"I want to break the bust; Oddo will forgive." She made a sudden determined step towards the Simonetta.

Mrs Grahame was frightened. Grasping Helen by the arm she held her back, crying, "Helen, Helen, listen——"

"No, no, no," and, breaking away, the girl made an effort to reach the bust, then suddenly changing her mind she threw herself on a fauteuil and began to laugh hysterically.

Mrs Grahame rang for help and telephoned to the doctor.

## CHAPTER VI.

## AT THE WALDORF-ASTORIA.

"MIND, if anything happens to Helen, I'll fix that old tyrant as sure as my name is Oddo Palmieri. I will, even if I have to take a siesta on your electric bench."

That Helen was ill had been confirmed by Wade, who could have laughed at the violent tirade.

"There is a touch of your volcanoes in that Italian blood of yours, Palmieri. There is no need of such action. New York, I guess, can be spared this double crime. Helen is not only on the way to recovery, but her mother thinks she will be able to leave her room by to-morrow. The nervous crisis, perhaps, did good after all, saving her from more serious consequences."

"How is she—tell me—have you seen her?" Palmieri looked at Wade dubiously. "I hope you are not keeping anything back."

"It is just as I tell you," reassured Wade. "I have my information direct from Mrs Grahame."

"Did Mrs Grahame speak of what happened that night?"

"Of course she did, and she requested me to express

her regret. We knew of Grahame's capacity for making an ass of himself, but that night he surpassed his friends' expectation. We were all sorry over what occurred. Has Mitchell written to you? He said he would. Excuse the expression, but he spit the words right into Grahame's face, that 'he hoped Mr Palmieri wouldn't think he, Grahame, represented the standard of American manners.'"

"Yes; I had a very polite note from Mr Mitchell inviting me to lunch. Mr Bartlett also wrote, and Mr Bowler called yesterday, but I happened to be out. I hope to make my apologies to them for beating such a hasty retreat that night. I don't think for a minute that Mr Grahame's style of dealing with foreigners is the orthodox American one. Every country has its share of lunatics."

"I believe we have the lion's share," answered Wade, with a nod of conviction. "Lunacy travels about hand in hand with wealth; only when it's a consequence of too much money people call it eccentricity. Well, now, let us sit down here and talk over what can be done to make this rather crooked business straight."

They selected a far-off corner of the Waldorf drawing-room, Mr Wade saying he wanted to sit where he couldn't see a certain clock that stood in the middle of the room, for he was incapable of talking with any sense in sight of that ugly gilded tower.

Before Wade could bring up the subject of his errand, he was bound to answer many more questions about Helen, and assure Palmieri once more that she only needed complete rest.

"And now, my dear fellow"—it was with this rather pleasant address that he began to speak of an unsuccessful mission—"I'm sorry to tell you that I failed to convince Grahame."

"I am not at all surprised," said Palmieri bitterly. "I knew what would be the result with that determined fanfaron. Indeed, I hardly know why I consented to let him see the letter; it was not like me. I knew it was useless, and might have at least saved my dignity. A man like Mr Grahame is capable of thinking I was forcing myself to win his benevolence."

"No, my dear friend, I cannot share your opinion. You had been grossly accused, and your cousin's letter, like a solution of an old English melodrama, arrived just at the right moment. Why not, I thought, take advantage of it, and go and put the declaration under Grahame's nose, so he'd see that he had behaved like a fool?"

"Excuse me; I'm surprised that you, being so familiar with his incorrigible temper, did not foresee how useless the experiment would be."

"I thought there would be no harm in trying, but I found him furious as an animal over the turn things had taken."

"You mean, I suppose, on account of Helen's illness?"

"Heavens, no! That's another of his peculiarities. If he has the slightest twinge, he thinks he is going to die straight off; but when other people are ill—especially one of his family—he calls their complaints imaginary. When Mrs Grahame told him Helen had

been ill all night, he said, 'Nerves—mere fancy; she'll get over it.' "

"What a brute! But go on; don't spare anything. Did he speak of me?"

"Well—yes; he did speak of you, in this way," Wade laughed: "'When is that damned Italian going back to the country where he belongs?'"

"Mr Grahame is mistaken," said Palmieri with decision. "I am not going back to my country unless a certain person goes with me."

"That's right; I like that. But, to the main point, Grahame is as mad as a hatter because the story has got blazed about. To make matters worse, Mitchell and Bartlett sent him a bill of what was due on the bet. They made out a ridiculous reckoning, claiming an enormous sum was owing them because Grahame had lost the bet within an hour."

"And what else?"

"Oh, well, you know Grahame by this time. I came near having a quarrel with him. If I didn't, it was because I was afraid it might only serve to complicate matters."

"But did he say anything about the letter?"

"First he gave it a look as if it were a money cheque to be cashed, then remarked, 'This cousin must have been a man of strong nerve. For a dying man he writes with an unusually firm hand.' 'Is that so impossible?' I asked. 'I don't want to say anything more about it,' he answered. Do you know, he still holds to it that the bust is antique, and he won't change his mind. Beside the question of his own

conceit there's his brother's reputation at stake. He says it was impossible that Paul should make such a blunder. But mark what I tell you, Mr Palmieri; mulish and unreasonable as Grahame is, he's more annoyed because, through Mitchell and Bartlett, the story of the bet has leaked out. He imagines he is the laughing-stock of Wall Street. After all, I feel convinced that if you could furnish some solid proof of your statement, he'll act as square as a wrestler who has got the worst in the ring."

"But don't you agree that my offering proof has already passed all decency? I believe any ordinary man would think so."

Mr Wade rolled his cigar in his fingers while making a study of his boots. It was evident he felt that his young friend was in the right.

"But you are not an ordinary man, Mr Palmieri," he said, with diplomatic obliquity.

"Why?"

"Because you are a man in love; because whatever you do, the love you have for Helen Grahame excuses your dignity. I am not very strong on the Bible—haven't looked inside one since one night I slept here in this hotel and found the good book on my writing-table. I had to resort to it because I had no newspapers, and never think of going to sleep without reading. Well, I remember I read about a man that served seven or eight years so he could marry a girl. That's the kind of man I can quote."

"For Helen's sake I would consent to be the slave of Mr Grahame: she is worth it. But, laying pride

and dignity aside, let us suppose that my situation were criminal and that Grahame could bring me before justice. What proof would I have to offer? My cousin has committed suicide, Mr Grahame's brother is dead: where are the witnesses?"

"But, as I tell you, I don't think Grahame sets so much importance on the fact itself. What he wants is proof that the bust *is* modern; but he's too proud to call in an expert. But even that wouldn't be final, as he held Paul the best of experts. I told him you had the proof of the coin; but he scoffed at such an offer, where one must break the egg to make the omelette. Have you any photographs of the bust? I know that artists often take them while the clay is fresh."

"No, I never thought of it. But I can get a photograph of the model who sat for the bust. She is the daughter of my gardener at the Villa degli Olmi. It happens that the likeness is rather striking."

"That might do as a *pis-aller*: I should attend to the matter at once."

"Mr Pam—my—ri! Mr Pam—my—ri!" called a page from down the corridor. The name was so badly pronounced that it did not strike Palmieri's attention.

"There; that fellow is mutilating your name. He has rubbed out the *l*, and turned the *i* into the English alphabet; but I am sure he wants you all the same. Somebody is here to see you. Now I must be off; but I'll come round as soon as I have any news."

Palmieri took the card from the page and read—

"ETTORE RUBELLI."

## CHAPTER VII.

## ETTORE RUBELLI.

By good fortune Wade left before Palmieri cast his eyes on the card. He would probably have recognised the man he had called "the stool-pigeon of Bandini."

"Is he waiting?" asked Palmieri of the hotel page.

"No, sir; the gentleman left his card with the request that it should be given you at once."

On the card Rubelli had scribbled in pencil, "Will you kindly meet me at the Café Martin this evening, or allow me to call at your hotel?"

"I shall have nothing to do with that man," was the first impulse that sprang to Palmieri's mind.

He knew Rubelli by sight and reputation, but never had had occasion to speak with him. The day he called on the Antiquarian in Via Valfonda, Rubelli was not there to make the usual inquiry before admitting a stranger.

Oddo was undecided what to do, and thankful in a way that Rubelli had not forced his presence but left him time for consideration. What could have brought



the man to America? Of his shamefaced swindling, Palmieri knew already three victims in New York.

Overcome by curiosity, he finally resolved to go to the Café Martin.

Notwithstanding the great transformation, Palmieri on entering the café recognised his fellow-countryman. Except for his gimlet-eyes and his mulatto's colour, it might have been difficult to discover a Rubelli in that well-clad gentlemanly-looking person. It is said that an evening suit is the touchstone with which to detect a ruffian in fine clothes, but certainly it was not so with Rubelli, who looked more like an Indian nabob than the right-hand assistant of the Florentine antiquarian.

As Palmieri advanced the man stood up, bowed, and motioned him to take a seat at his table. Palmieri ignored the familiarity of the outstretched hand.

Rubelli, however, showed no resentment. He withdrew his hand with a clever gesticulation as he said with a smile, "I am glad to see you, Signor Palmieri. Allow me to offer you something?"

The refusal was met by another seraphic smile.

"Now, sir, will you kindly tell me the motive of this meeting?" Palmieri asked rather stiffly.

"Not a bad one—not at all a bad one," Rubelli answered half apologetically. "I am going on to Chicago to-morrow. You will pardon the liberty I have taken, but learning you were in New York I thought you might be interested to hear some incidents of Count Saccetti's tragic end. I was indeed the very last person he spoke to in this world. You will

excuse the intrusion, as I had no other intention but to do you a favour."

The facility Rubelli had for changing manner and intonation was worthy of notice: these last words were uttered with such disarming humility that Palmieri wondered if his brusque address had wounded the poor fellow. But then he recollected the untold rascality of the "poor fellow," and all sympathy was forced out of his soul as he laconically returned—

"I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"I suppose there is no need to tell you that Count Saccetti was the victim of Bandini the antiquarian. In fact, his death was murder."

"How so?"

Palmieri, looking straight at Rubelli's restless eyes, tried to discover whether the fellow was playing a part.

"I am telling you what all Florence knows."

"But how am I going to account for your accusation—when I know that you and Bandini are associates?"

"Perhaps because many things have happened lately, and—there are many miles between the associates, as you put it. But let me say, miserable poor creature that I am, I still deserve pity, for I have been an instrument in the hands of Bandini, and not from choice. No, sir; even for a Rubelli to be called Bandini's associate sounds like an insult."

Who can read the chameleon-like countenance of a professional liar? Yet if the grieved look that came to his face at being classed with Bandini was not genuine, then, as an actor, Rubelli could capture the palms from Roscius himself.

Poor wretch, thought Palmieri; after all he may be one of the many slaves of necessity and hard circumstances.

"It was not my intention to be uncivil," he said, "but if, as I understand, you are no longer with Bandini, you have done well to leave him."

"I see that you are not informed as to what has been going on in Florence. Many things have happened lately."

"You have something to tell me about my cousin's death?"

"I know very little of what happened in Paris between the Count and Bandini. I imagine, though, there was a stormy encounter because of the rejection on the part of the Count to a proposal made by Bandini. It was an offer of marriage to a daughter of his. It had been a long-cherished plan. I knew of it myself, and could see the old man already looked upon the Count as a son and partner in his schemes."

"Was it at the time of the auction sale of the so-called Saccetti Collection?"

"Exactly," answered Rubelli, unabashed. "One night before we left Paris I went to Bandini's apartment to inform him about the result of some business. I found the man I parted with a few hours before another man. I had often seen him in his raving fits, but never in such a state. I tried to talk with him of business—it was an important affair—but he would listen to nothing. 'I want you to go to the Hôtel Ritz,' he shouted, 'and have Count Saccetti arrested.' I thought he was crazy or joking,—he had always been so partial to the Count. I laughed awkwardly; this

increased his anger. He came up and with his fist gave me a blow between the eyes, but a weak one,—there was no strength in him. For some time back I had watched him closely, and even suspected softening of the brain, so strange his actions had been at times, and this last act confirmed my doubts; the man was positively crazy. However, I went to the hotel with the intention of putting the Count on his guard, but was informed he had left Paris. I went back to Bandini and told him the news. ‘Gone without my consent? Where has he gone? They ought to know at the hotel,’ he cried excitedly. I told him that the Count had ordered a *petit omnibus* and paid his bill; all they knew at the hotel was that the porter heard the Count say to the driver, ‘To the *Gare de l’Est*.’ ‘Then go to your hotel; he may have sent word to you,’ insisted Bandini. At my hotel I found a letter, but not from the Count. It was from my poor old mother, telling me she was very ill and wanted to see me once more.”

Rubelli paused, and the buzzing sound of the café was audible.

“And to think through that brute,” went on Rubelli, “I was unable to console my poor mother’s last moments. She was all I had in this world. I’ve lived and suffered that her last years might be comfortable.”

How Bandini had been responsible Rubelli did not explain.

“When Bandini was certain that the Count had gone to Florence,” Rubelli continued, “he started off the same night, leaving me in Paris to liquidate the impending business transactions. After I got back to

Florence I learned that the Count was in great trouble—that Bandini had threatened to foreclose the mortgage he held on the Saccetti Palace. I knew he was determined to ruin the Count through revenge.

“One evening he called me in his usual mysterious way. ‘Here, Rubelli,’ he said, handing me a letter, ‘take this to Count Saccetti. See him yourself and wait for an answer.’ The envelope he gave me was rather heavy. What was inside? What could be the secret that necessitated the letter being delivered *in manu propria*? I asked myself. I came very near opening it. I had been guilty of such little indelicacies; and if I hadn’t been so over-nice that time your cousin might be alive now. I hadn’t seen Count Saccetti since he left Paris, and I found him quite changed—he had lost his careless gaiety. He received me with civility, took the envelope, tore it open, and drew out some letters. As soon as he cast his eyes over them his face turned ashen. He went to his desk, sat down, re-reading the letters carefully. When he had finished he got up, and with his hand on the papers stood as if in meditation.

“‘Have you no other instruction, Rubelli?’ he asked.

“‘Only that Bandini wants an answer.’

“The Count crossed the room with the papers. One by one he lighted them at a candle, then threw them into the fireplace. When the whole was consumed he took the poker and stirred up the ashes. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘go to your master and tell exactly what you have seen: that’s my answer.’ But I shall never forget the expression of his face as he spoke—his last words.

The Count Saccetti was seen alive by no one after that. I was the last he spoke to. That night he shot himself with sure hand; only one bullet, but it did its work.

"And now, Signor Palmieri, I have something here that might throw a great light on your cousin's death. I happen to have photographs of those letters he read and burned that last night before his tragic ending."

From an inside pocket Rubelli took out several photographs and handed them to Palmieri. They were without doubt love-letters written by Alberto's mother to Bostico Tosinchi. There could be no mistake; the beautiful Countess Saccetti had written them. The photographs showed the ink had faded; not so the violent expression of her love. Had Alberto been ignorant of that page of family history what a lightning-stroke it must have been!"

"But how and when came the original letters into Bandini's hands?"

"It seems incredible, but from the letters in my possession I believe that years ago Bandini was connected in some way with the church—perhaps a gravedigger, who knows? The church was near Montegalli, and Bandini was familiar with the love affair between the mother of Count Alberto and Prince Bostico Tosinchi. If Bandini has not murdered the Prince he certainly has helped the offended husband in his revenge. How he got hold of the letters I can't say."

"Was he in the habit of photographing documents?" Palmieri asked, looking at the photographs.

"Yes; he invariably duplicated important documents in that way. He was unusually skilled with his camera. You ought to see his collection of photographs—I have them now—a unique collection. There are reproductions of blurred paintings, portraits where hardly any form can be made out—the skilful brush of Rubelli supplied the deficiency; there are photographs of needy statues destitute of limbs, headless bodies now complete and labelled in museums as Messalina, Julius Cæsar, Faustina, and all the Roman nobility. Wouldn't those *gros bonnets* of collectors laugh should they see 'the before and the after.'"

"But how does it happen you have these letters in your hands?"

"Perhaps it would be better for us to go to my hotel, if you don't mind. I can better explain while showing you Bandini's *Archivio segreto*. It contains paper that will particularly interest you."

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE TENTACLES OF THE OCTOPUS.

"You can see for yourself," said Rubelli, "what a mania that lurking leech had for putting people at his mercy."

They were seated in Rubelli's room before a mass of papers spread over the table. Some of these Bandini had carefully pinned together; others enclosed with written indication on the envelope.

Rubelli laid both hands on the pile. "I read these papers on my way over here," he said, "and I can tell you they must have cost many a pang and sleepless night. Our Leopardi was right, 'The world is but a plot of rascals against knaves.'"

"Is he placing himself among the knaves or rascals?" Palmieri asked himself. At the idea of Rubelli coming out with such a quotation he could see the unfortunate Italian poet turn in his grave.

"You may put me on the list of rascals—I don't plead sanctity," said Rubelli, as if in answer to Palmieri's mental question. Taking up a yellow envelope he added, "These documents concern only the family of



Count Alberto Saccetti. Take them; you'll find them interesting—very."

Palmieri imagined Rubelli was about to strike a bargain on Alberto's *pattes de mouche*. "Take them, they are yours; you may trust me. I never tell family secrets."

Rubelli, in his unrestrained talk, had touched the gamut of humanity in its various keys—cynical, sentimental, philosophical, but always theatrical. What was he driving at, and what purpose lay hidden under the offer?

"Do you expect——" Palmieri stopped short for want of a proper word to finish the sentence. The expression of the face heralded his unuttered words. Rubelli understood.

"No, Signore, I have no pecuniary interest in those papers; it was not my idea to take advantage of them."

"But you are offended."

"No, I am not; that would be inconsistent. But as good deeds are not yet monopolised by the *honest*, let me say that a reprobate may be moved by a fit of—honesty. I should like to know that feeling; it must be a refreshing sensation. I cannot deny that I always had something like envy for those sheltered from need; they acquire their good character on easy terms. Take these papers, please, *à l'œil*." And thrusting the papers into Palmieri's hands he went on talking about Bandini.

"As I said, that hell-hound had a real mania for getting documents and keeping them for remote ends.

Here are letters of people dead and disappeared a score of years. Why did he keep them unless he intended to make a compact with the devil and go on blackmailing in the other world?"

"But how did he get at his victims?" Palmieri asked, thinking about his cousin.

"In various ways; he had no specific plan. Oh, but he was so quick, always on the alert. You know the French proverb: 'Every man has a pig dozing in his heart.' Well, the one that sought rest inside my master's bosom never found time even to close its eyes. Look, for instance, at the temerity of his enterprise."

Rummaging among the papers Rubelli picked up an envelope. "Do you see this?—it contains love-letters of Contessa Terghi—a nasty scandal, through which Bandini got hold of some valuable Gobelins of the Countess—one of the boldest of his acts in the way of blackmailing. It seems to me that I could go on talking for ever about the treachery, bribing, and intrigue of my master. But lately, I must say, after all those years of constant success, he had grown reckless and neglectful. Mark me, Bandini was ageing; he was in his dotage."

"But how, may I ask again, did you come into possession of these letters? Is Bandini dead?"

"Why, you haven't read the papers? He is alive, but it's not my fault. I wanted to kill him long ago. I confess that after the death of my mother I often meditated how I could get rid of him and do the world a favour. But you ask about the documents.

First, let me tell you I have known for years that among Bandini's papers there was *one* I wanted. I don't care to go into particulars about it, but that one document in my master's hand was as good as a *lettre de cachet* for the Bastille: he might have placed me behind the bars at his pleasure. Would you believe it?—I have spent years looking at that safe where he kept his papers, wondering how I could get inside, just as a prisoner is studying through the bars how he can get outside. I believe I have grown cross-eyed looking at those five brass knobs that held the combination."

There was a certain queer squint to Rubelli's vision that gave some colour to his words.

"I had known where Bandini hid the key of the safe," he continued, "but as for the combination of those five letters I might just as well have tried to square a circle or divide an angle into three sections. But chance came to my rescue the very day Count Saccetti killed himself. That morning Bandini was at the open safe when I entered the room with a newspaper in my hand. 'Count Saccetti has shot himself,' I said on a sudden.

"'May hell open and swallow you!' came from Bandini's unprepared lips. His whole body shook with excitement—not for the loss of the Count, but because he had escaped him.

"'Let me see;' and he snatched the paper from my hand. He set about to read the startling news without moving from the safe; only automatically he pushed with his right knee the iron door, so I

could see nothing of what was inside. That was a lucky idea of his, because while he was reading the astounding news of the suicide, I stood eyeing from over his shoulder the five letters on the brass knobs. In fear that I should forget them I left the room, and with a pencil wrote the letters on one of my cuffs. 'Rubelli,' he said when I went back, 'I must go to Pistoia to-day to attend to that business they wrote about (it was to see an altar-piece), and very likely I shall not be home before five o'clock this evening. Go to the Saccetti Palace, find out all you can concerning the Count, and whether he has left papers for me. I am greatly interested—but I cannot postpone going to Pistoia.' I knew what he was thinking of: that Count Saccetti might have written some accusation against him before taking his life.

"I made my plan in an instant. As soon as he was gone I hurried to the safe, wondering if the letters I had noted were the right ones, or if by chance the Antiquarian had prudently turned the knobs after opening it. I took the key and set the combination. Softly, with no more noise than my breathing, the heavy door of the safe opened. It would be difficult to give you an idea of my joy at the thought of freedom. Suffice to say that I, the sacrilegious unbeliever, grasped the cross of a reliquary concealed in the safe—and kissed it. I found the papers, and ran quickly through them in search of *the* one; and when I had it in my hand I believe I tore it into a thousand pieces. I was about to close

the safe, when the sight of that heap of papers gave me a suggestion: Why not deliver the other victims and denounce the infernal wretch now that he could do me no harm? I took from the safe all the papers and quickly conveyed them to a safe place out of the house. Then I went for the police. I knew his cellar was filled with *res furtiva*: church thieving and receiving of spoil had always been one of his pet trades.

"What the police discovered under those vaults can hardly be described. It seemed that all the artistic thefts of Tuscany had found shelter in the lower regions over which my master ruled. The perquisition finished, I said to the inspector, 'If you guard the house, letting no one out, you will be able to catch your man in his own trap.' You can believe me, I showed the police every hole and corner; and the harvest was great.

"I took them into the factory where so many transformations had been performed. When I showed some of the devices for producing *age*,—wheels covered with velvet to give the last gentle rub to marble, sprinklers for acid, and chemicals for causing corrosion and *patine*,—there was a roar of laughter. But what took the inspector's particular attention was our machine for making worm-holes which he had mistaken for a dentist's drill. To please him I called a workman, one very deft with that particular instrument, and asked him to show off the trick. Taking a small gilded frame, and loosening the axle, he set the machine to flying. In less than no time it was working miracles, piercing, gnawing, and boring

holes—always taking the identical obliquity of the Italian worm. You may not be aware, sir, of the charm this trick gives to furniture. And how they *do* sell!—because, strange as it may seem, there are still people who believe in authentic holes and genuine dust.”

“But what about Bandini?” asked Palmieri, impatient to get at the end of the story.

“I will tell you. About five o'clock everything was ready, as in the last act of a drama. In one corner the policemen had amassed the *corpo del delitto*, a miscellaneous gathering of objects that had already been identified as stolen. The inspector of the police with his men stood before the door from where their man was expected to enter. I lay in wait behind a broken pillar that Bandini intended to transform into a Greek statue. I am a cold-blooded person, sir, but I can assure you, when I heard the city clock of Palazzo Vecchio strike five, my heart was no more a heart, but a stubborn pendulum in my breast. It was nearly six before the carriage stopped at the door; the key turned and Bandini entered. At first he was so bewildered by the scene that he became tongue-tied. Then, pulling himself together, he began to shout, ‘Rubelli, who are these people? What are they doing here? Where is Rubelli?—Rubelli!’ He cried my name out at the top of his voice, paying no attention to the intruders. ‘Here I am,’ said I, stepping from my hiding place, and I looked at him with my best smile of defiance. ‘Traitor, son of Satan!’ he cried. I retorted—

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"‘Your master, Satan, has protected me for once. Satan, do you understand? S-A-T-A-N, a unique setting of letters for the *open sesame*. What a fool I’ve been all these years not to have guessed the word you would choose.’

"He knew in a moment I had discovered the combination of the safe. Then he turned to the head of the police, whom he had recognised.

"‘Mr Inspector,’ he said, ‘may I ask what you want here?’

"The official pointed to the pile of stuff that had escaped the Antiquarian’s attention.

"‘Is that all? What an absurd charge,’ he said boldly. ‘Oh, don’t be too sure,’ to me, ‘*non ride ben chi ultimo non ride*—and I may be the last yet to laugh.’ ‘If I am going with you I must get ready,’ he said to the inspector. He stepped to a large wardrobe, an antique piece where he used to keep his clothes, opened it, and entered. ‘I believe the man means to hide in the wardrobe,’ said the inspector, and commenced tapping on the door. Hearing nothing, he ordered his men to break down the door; a couple of vigorous policemen forced the lock.

"‘That man must be the devil himself,’ exclaimed one of the men. ‘Why, the place is empty.’ It was true. Bandini had made his escape by an inside way. Strange to say, I had never suspected the existence of such a trap, nor do I know now what it was for, unless the master was in the habit of watching or listening to his workmen from there. It is a fact that he always knew what they were talking about.”

"Then Bandini was not arrested after all?"

"No; not then. But I came very near being arrested instead. The inspector was furious because I had not warned him of the exit to the wardrobe. How could I? But logic is not the strong point of our *shirri*. Yet, but for them I wouldn't now be on my way to Chicago to lecture on the subject of 'What I Know about Modern Antiques.' Let us hope it is a wise step. Beaumarchais used to say, 'Were he accused of stealing the belfry tower of Notre Dame of Paris he would fly his country rather than trust to Justice.' I have taken his advice."

"But you speak as if Bandini were arrested."

"He was; and you could never divine how. At daybreak he was found astride one of the marble lions of the Loggia dei Lanzi. He imagined he was escaping on a chimerical horse, and was swearing before an astonished crowd of labourers and night loafers that he had been wrongfully accused of carrying off Michael Angelo's colossus—the statue of David. There is no need to tell you that my master was hopelessly insane."



## CHAPTER IX.

## THE LAMB AND THE LION.

HELEN was in the art-gallery when her father entered with his hat and overcoat on, ready to go to his office. Mr Grahame was in the habit of taking a peep at his treasures in the morning before leaving the house.

"Good morning, Nell," he said in his customary cheery voice, and without noticing anything else went straight to the bust; there he stood with his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed approvingly on the work.

Helen was at the bay-window watching her father. His portly figure—a typical Wall Street fish-shape outline—partially obstructed the view of the bust. He took off his hat, placed it on a chair, then struck a match to light a cigar, but with a brusque change of mood held the match close to the shady part of the bust and set himself to examine minutely the surface of the work. The match went out. He doubled up his fingers and with his knuckles gave the head a thorough tapping, accompanied by a deliberating hum, hum. At last the corollary of his analysis came—

"Wade's a fool. That humbug friend of his never saw this bust before."

Helen approached her father.

"But, papa," she asked resentfully, "what object could Mr Palmieri have in telling a falsehood?"

Grahame scowled.

"Why do you ask such an insane question?" he said in his harsh grating tones. "Do you advocate this first-class nobody?"

"Certainly I do. I believe every word Mr Palmieri said."

In Helen's voice there was the ring of defiance.

"What——? What did you say? What——?"

"I said I believe he told the truth."

"What do you know about this adventurer?"

"I know he is not an adventurer; he is at *least* a gentleman."

Helen's words came determinately, and their effect showed in a sudden vein of anger that rose on Grahame's forehead above the left eye.

"Don't give me any sauce, Helen."

Grahame looked sharply at his daughter.

"It strikes me," he said, "that you are taking a good deal more interest than is necessary in this Bleeker Street patrician. He's up to some game or he wouldn't be trying to make himself out a Michael Angelo. Who is he, anyway? What's he doing over here? Where did you and your mother pick him up?"

"*Pick him up?* We met him in Florence. You have forgotten how I wrote you all about our visit

at Montegalli with Mr Palmieri's relatives. Prince Tosighi is one of the old families of Italy."

"What do I care about that? We're already run over by these noble vagabonds. You and your mother are cracked about Italy. What were you doing over there—encouraging rascally Counts? Go on, go on—I want to hear all about it. Have you been making a fool of yourself?"

"No, I haven't made a fool of myself. I did encourage Mr Palmieri to come, however. I wanted to see him again, and I made him promise——"

"Good God! Who ever thought a daughter of mine could be so in—de—corous!"

"Father, I must tell you——"

"What is it?" Grahame had a vague foreboding that he was going to hear something he didn't want to hear.

"I am sorry if I disappoint you—I love Mr Palmieri."

"Damn it! What a state of things!" Grahame brandished his arms and doubled up his fist as if struggling for a fight. "Shame on you! How can you speak so disrespectfully? Does this—does that—Damn it, I can't think of a name mean enough for the beggar! Have you talked any of these rigmarole nonsense together? I suppose your mother is in it; she's got the match-making mania now."

"What do you mean, father? Mamma has nothing to do with my love for Oddo——"

"Dodo?—Dago. A nice name, and you throw it into my face! Oh God!" While Grahame's arms

shot about like meteoric flashes, his legs performed a sort of pirouette.

At this serio-comic performance Helen stepped quickly behind the pedestal, seeking protection from the statue.

"Don't ever speak again to me about this Dago Palmieri! Never! I won't listen to it—I won't have it! Do you hear me, by——"

Helen had never seen her father in such rage before. She crept closer to the bust.

"Helen, do you hear me? Go away; get out of my sight! I won't have this blackguard round."

Simonetta gave a jerking sway.

"Do you hear me?"

Grahame advanced toward his daughter. A great crash was heard, and the bust of Simonetta lay on the floor in fragments!

Helen stood aghast.

For a moment Grahame was rigid, as if stricken with paralysis. Then, despite the shock of the catastrophe, he stooped and gave a searching glance over the debris. Something attracted his attention, for he made a dive and picked from out the ruins a rusty-looking coin. When his heavy body regained its equilibrium he stood examining it for a moment; after which he took a step forward and flung the coin down on the mantelpiece with a—

"Well—I'll be damned!"

Among Helen Grahame's wedding presents there was one that attracted particular interest.

Embedded in a circle of emeralds, diamonds, and rubies—the Italian colours—was a coin bearing the coat-of-arms of the Holy Father. Not a present from the king—the gates of Rome were entered regardless of Saint Peter's keys; nor from the Pope, for since that memorable day the Italian colours his Holiness has no more blessed.

It was a riddle, the odd coin studded by such remarkable stones—but who cares even to try to solve a riddle where there is a wedding-cake?

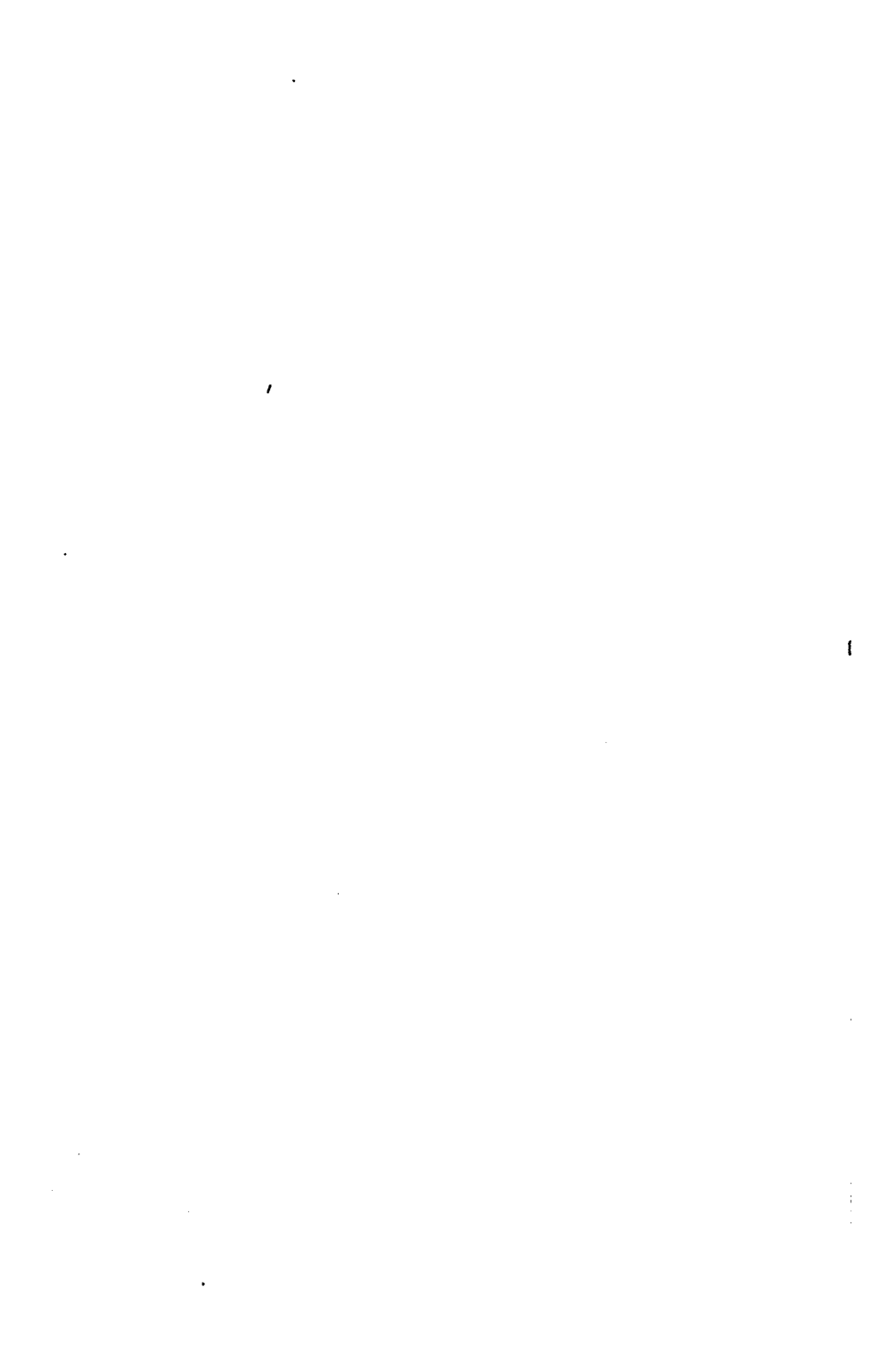
The Sèvres clock struck three.

The merry throng passed by. A lively *gavotte* was heard: the same that Oddo Palmieri had listened to when a boy in the old Saccetti Palace at Florence.

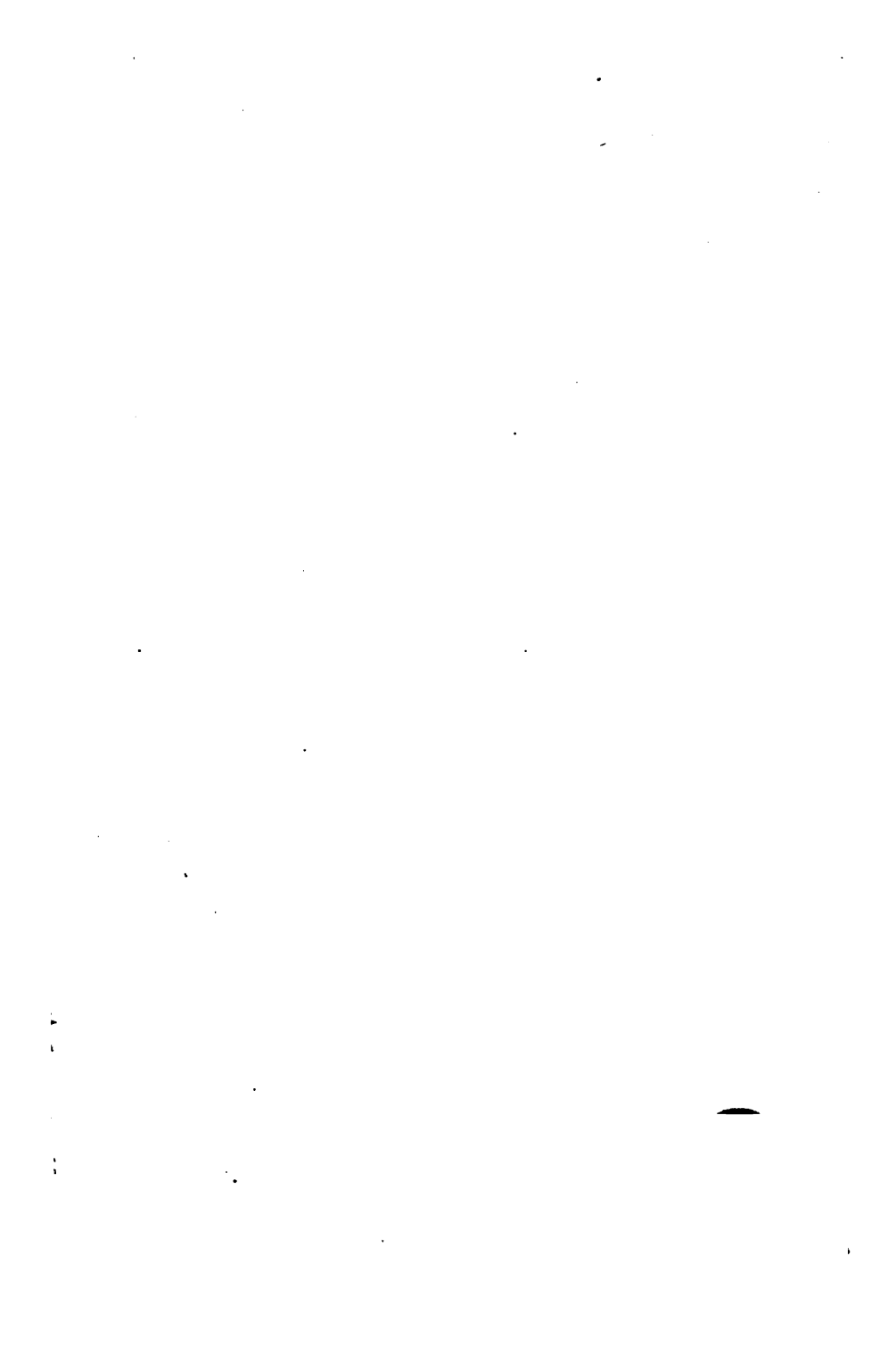
THE END.











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